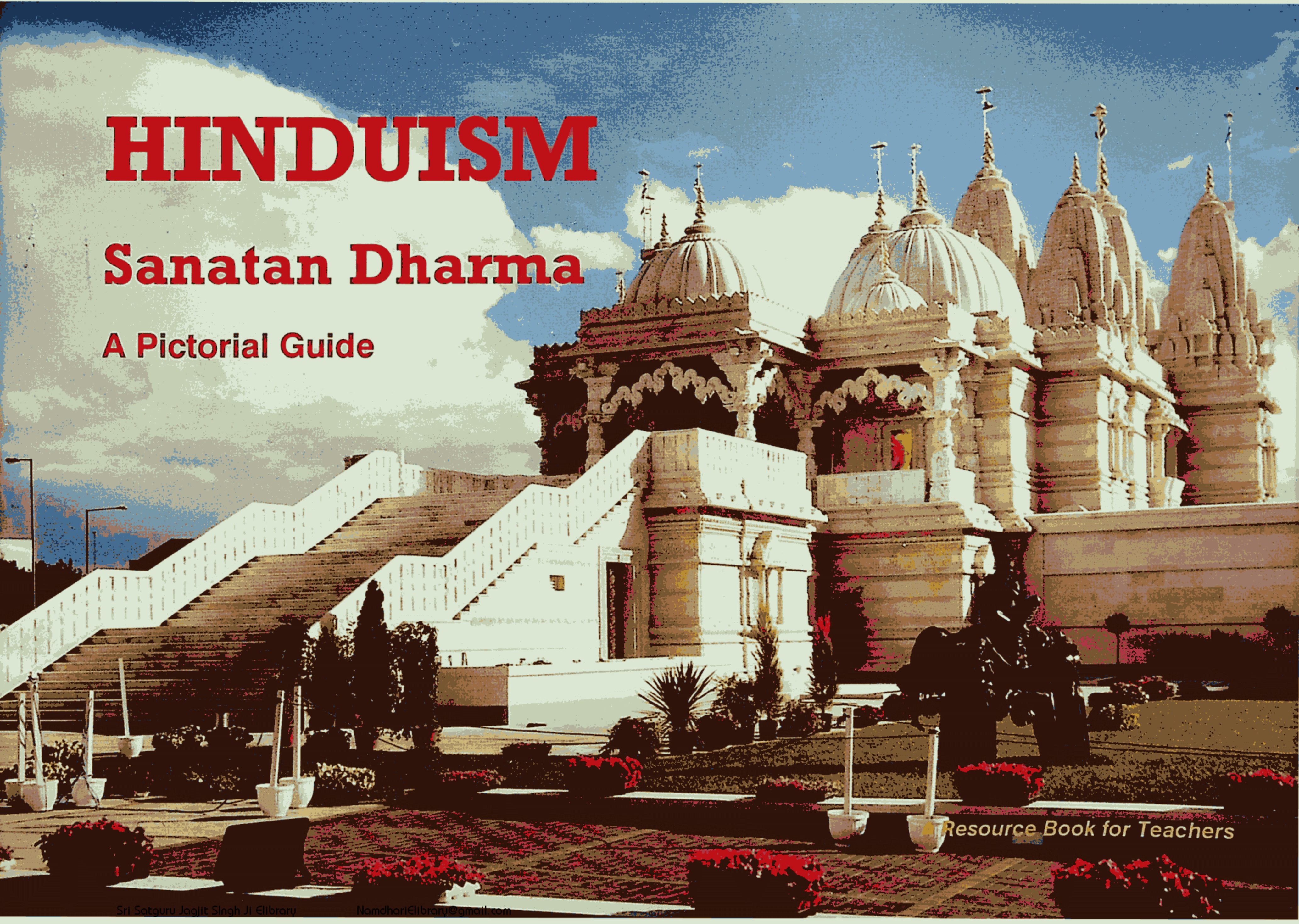


HINDUISM

Sanatan Dharma

A Pictorial Guide



A Resource Book for Teachers

Hinduism

Sanatan Dharma

A Pictorial Guide

A Resource Book for Teachers

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ABOUT CEM

The Christian Education Movement is an ecumenical educational charity which works throughout the United Kingdom. Its aims are:

- to support religious and moral education in schools;
- to increase awareness of the often unstated beliefs and values by which people live;
- to articulate Christian perspectives on education.

CEM is committed to the teaching of the major world faiths in religious education, and to an accurate and fair representation of their beliefs and practices in all its teaching materials.

CEM fulfils these aims:

- by publishing teaching materials and background papers together with a termly magazine *RE Today* and the *British Journal of Religious Education*;
- by offering in-service training, advisory and consultancy services through its professional staff;
- by arranging national and regional courses for teachers, pupils, parents and others interested in education;
- by research and curriculum development work;
- by supporting the Professional Council for Religious Education, especially in organising local and regional RE groups.

CEM is funded primarily by the subscriptions of schools and individuals, who find its services essential to their work, but also by local education authorities, churches and trusts. It is a partnership between all those concerned with the religious, moral and spiritual development of children and young people. The Department for Education recognises its work.

To receive further details of CEM resources and subscription services, send to the address below.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This book is the work of many hands. The first main section on God as One and Many is based on the earlier CEM publication *Hindu Gods and Goddesses* which was written by the late Ken Oldfield. We are glad to take this opportunity to re-issue his work in this form. The illustrations for this section are by Mike Nicholson as they were in the original. The text of the remainder of the book is by Lat Blaylock, CEM Professional Development Officer, and the illustrations are by Alison Downie except for the two *rakhis* on page 28 which are by Elaine Walsh and Nicola Screen, and the *puja* tray on page 29 which is by Andrew Foster. We are grateful to Rasamandala Das, Dillip Kadodwala, Annie Meharg, T V Morjaria, and Alan Race for helping us to present an accurate and balanced text, but the responsibility for any remaining faults is ours alone.

Colin Johnson, CEM Publications Director

SERIES DETAILS

In print

Hinduism
Islam
Sikhism

Forthcoming

Buddhism
Christianity
Judaism

FRONT COVER PICTURE

The front cover picture shows the mandir at Neasden in north London which is the headquarters of the Swaminarayan Hindu Mission. It is one of the relatively few purpose-built mandirs in Britain at the time of publication, the majority being converted houses or churches. We are grateful to Yogesh Patel for providing us with an excellent range of photographs from which to choose for this purpose. The Shree Jalaram Prarthana Mandal in Leicester is another recently opened example of a purpose-built mandir.

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INTRODUCING THIS BOOK

Our purpose in offering this book of illustrations of Hindu faith is to enable teachers to introduce their pupils to this way of life in simple ways that are not religiously simplistic.

This book replaces CEM's 1987 booklet *Hindu Gods and Goddesses*, written by Ken Oldfield; it draws upon some of that material, but it ranges more widely in scope, introducing material about many different aspects of the faith and its expressions in the life of Hindu people. We have produced a number of photocopiable line drawings, and the text of the book is largely a commentary upon these carefully chosen illustrations. The drawings provide the teacher with accurate representations of Hindu deities, buildings, worship and practices, which may be photocopied for classroom use. We know of no other cost-effective way of providing whole classes of pupils with materials from which to work. The popularity of CEM's series of pictorial guides is no doubt partly dependent on the usefulness of the pictures we have made available.

We have another aim in producing this guide as well. Primary and secondary non-specialist teachers of RE might find in this book a short guide to some basic learning about Hindu traditions and practices which is not available elsewhere. If this is so, then the usefulness of the book is enhanced, and providing that certain dangers of oversimplification are avoided by the producers and the users of the book, the cause of good RE is served.

There are three main dangers to which we have been alert to in preparing the booklet. First, over-simplification of religion in schools can lead to stereotyping. Second, the reliance upon images in this book can divert attention from the inner life of Hindu people, a very important focus for RE, by concentrating too much upon the observable and the external. Thirdly, the diversity of the Hindu tradition in particular means that no book, let alone a brief one, can really offer more than a selection of snapshots from all that could be chosen.

The approach we have taken to avoid these dangers is worth stating explicitly. Firstly, the views of the Hindu community in Britain, as expressed in the Hindu Working Group Report from the SCAA Model Syllabuses for RE, have been given due weight in the selection of material for the book. Secondly the text has been offered to a number of Hindu educationists whose comments we have been grateful to receive.

Studying a religion with integrity will always involve learning what members of the faith consider most important, rather than what outsiders most often say about the religion. So the four categories which are offered by the Hindus who produced the SCAA Working Group Report have been used to help us to select and organise the material. In the context of a school RE syllabus, there is also a need for clarity in planning how to teach about more than one religion. We have often used seven categories, the fruit of consultations between faith groups supported by the World Council of Churches, to describe and study a religion. These in fact match up neatly to the four areas which the Hindus identified.

A study of Hindu faith which encompasses these categories will have taken a first step towards a real

SCAA Hindu Working Group categories	WCC interfaith categories
Concepts, truth and values	God Spiritual leaders
Family, community and traditions	Community Living the faith Life as journey
Worship	Worship
Scriptures	Sacred texts

understanding, but further steps are needed. Our illustrations are based upon images which we hope are balanced in that they introduce a range of beliefs and practice. We have tried to present aspects of the Hindu faith which are rooted in the tradition of the Sanatan Dharma in India, but expressed in the lives of British Hindus. Rather than focusing on the history of religions, we have tried to explore Hinduism as a living belief system, which many people in this country follow day by day. This focus close to home carries its own danger of distortion, but the common distortion is, in our judgement, too often in the direction of historical study rather than contemporary study. We would encourage those who use the illustrations to include wherever possible material which enables their students to consider what beliefs, ideas and commitments give rise to the outward and observable features of the faith, so that the pupils do not form a view of Hindu life that is only about externals. Teachers who are alert to these dangers will be best equipped to avoid them.

The selection of material offered here is therefore chosen to encourage a balanced and thoughtful approach to the Hindu religion, to facilitate easy classroom use, and to inform teachers briefly about some aspects of the Hindu way, particularly as it is lived in contemporary Britain. We would like to encourage a wider acquaintance with some of the literature which is now available about Hindus, much of which for both pupils and teachers takes a similar approach to the one outlined above. A short booklist is included inside the back cover.

In this way we hope this guide will contribute to RE which is far more than factual knowledge, and which encourages students both to learn about Hindus and their religion, and to reflect for themselves upon their own ultimate commitments.

INTRODUCING HINDUISM (Sanatan Dharma)

Many Hindu people, describing their own faith, refer to the eternal truths or teachings, the Sanatan Dharma. It is unfortunate that the very word 'Hindu' is a term imposed from outside the faith community. Where Christians and Buddhists name their religion from a founder, and where Muslims describe an attitude to God in the word 'Islam', the word 'Hindu' is derived from the name of the river Indus. We shall use it, but we shall also use the Sanatan Dharma as a description of Hinduism from within.

The origins of the Sanatan Dharma are in ancient India. The history of Hinduism can be traced over three and a half thousand years, and the tradition

sees its origins right at the start of the universe. Contemporary expressions of Sanatan Dharma are to be found all over the world, in Africa, the Caribbean and Europe as well as in Asia. It is very difficult to be accurate about the numbers of people who are Hindu, but responsible estimates suggest there are around 750 million Hindus in the world today. Something approaching half a million live in Britain. The way of life, beliefs and values of this British Hindu community are an appropriate focus for study in any British school. By exploring the way this living system of belief influences those who follow it, pupils can see how human experiences are similar and different in any culture or religion and by studying some of the Hindu answers to the questions which life throws up, they may extend their own personal search for meaning and value; these are important educational objectives, and we hope they will be facilitated by the materials in this book.

Concepts and Truths

The diversity of the Hindu tradition makes it difficult to introduce, but practically all Hindus believe in one God, the Supreme reality called Brahman. Everything comes from Brahman, and ultimately returns to Brahman. The One is often seen as unknowable, and unapproachable, but humans can come to God through the many forms of the gods. Along with this important concept of God and the gods, the Hindu concept of the human self, or *atman* is important. The *atman* is the self that does not die, but returns to the earth in another body according to the law of *karma* or 'cause and effect.' The beliefs about this are variously termed reincarnation, transmigration of souls or rebirth. In this way the self or soul may

move towards reunion with the eternal one, with Brahman, through a series of incarnations.

Community, Traditions and Worship

The family community is one important focus for faith among Hindu people, alongside the wider community of faith. Hindu community life is enriched by respect for older members of the family, by a sense of belonging to a wider family and caste or jati, and by the tradition of marking stages of life by rituals. The individual is supported by the community in progressing in devotion or faith towards renunciation of earthly life. It is firstly in the family, often chiefly by mothers and wives, that the long tradition of worship, community and values is shared with each generation, made alive in practice and drawn upon for strength, security, peace and purpose. The Hindu home may often include a shrine to one or more of the deities, and daily worship is offered by individuals or the whole extended family.

Scriptures

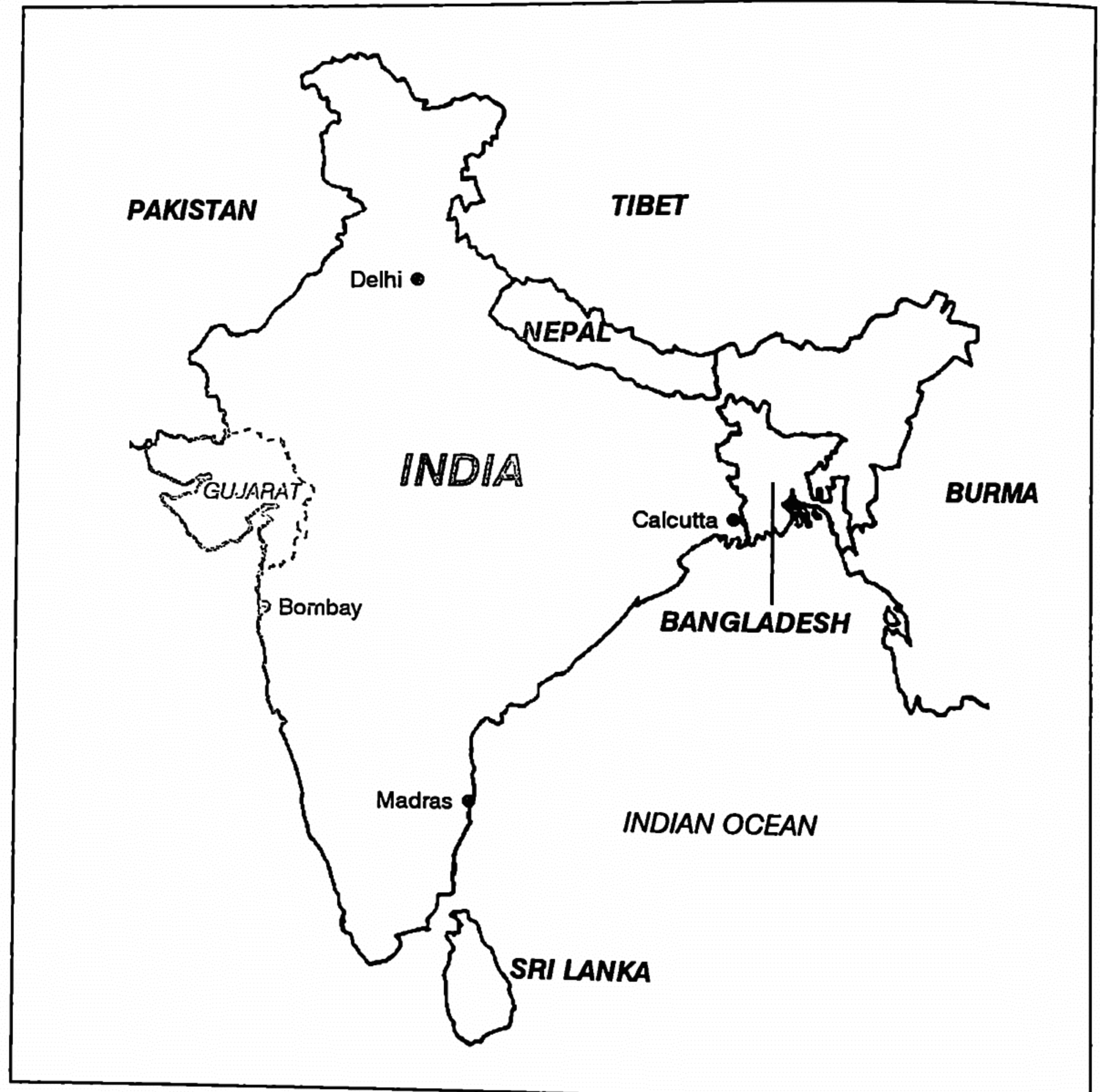
Hindu faith is rooted in scriptures. A number of sacred texts, both revealed and remembered (called *shruti* and *smriti* respectively) each have an important place for Hindus. The most authoritative are the Vedas. The range of scriptures includes social and ethical laws, poetry, epic stories of the gods and goddesses, philosophical material and hymns. The use, discussion and interpretation of these scriptures enlivens the Hindu community. A key example is the Bhagavad Gita, a part of the epic Mahabharata. This book is found in many

Hindu homes, wrapped in silk, read, learned and recited, and used as a source of guidance in life.

Hindu people often emphasise the importance of variety in their tradition, and so those who study are encouraged to explore widely the remarkable range and flexibility of the Sanatan Dharma, a little of which we have tried to present in what follows.

Map One: India

The country of India is about twelve times the size of Great Britain, one of the most populous nations on earth. Its government is secular, meaning that the policy of the state to all religions is to enable co-existence. A large majority of Indian people follow the Hindu religion. Of about 750 million Hindus in the world (1995 estimate), well over 90% live in India. India is a nation with few big cities, but many, many villages. The government since 1948 has been democratic, but before 1948 British colonial rule had been imposed on India for nearly a century. India is a land of geographical contrasts, including the low lying forests of Bengal, the mountain of the Himalayas, and the agricultural lands of Gujarat. It is impossible to sum up India – pupils might do geographical or historical study to broaden their understanding of the Hindu context.



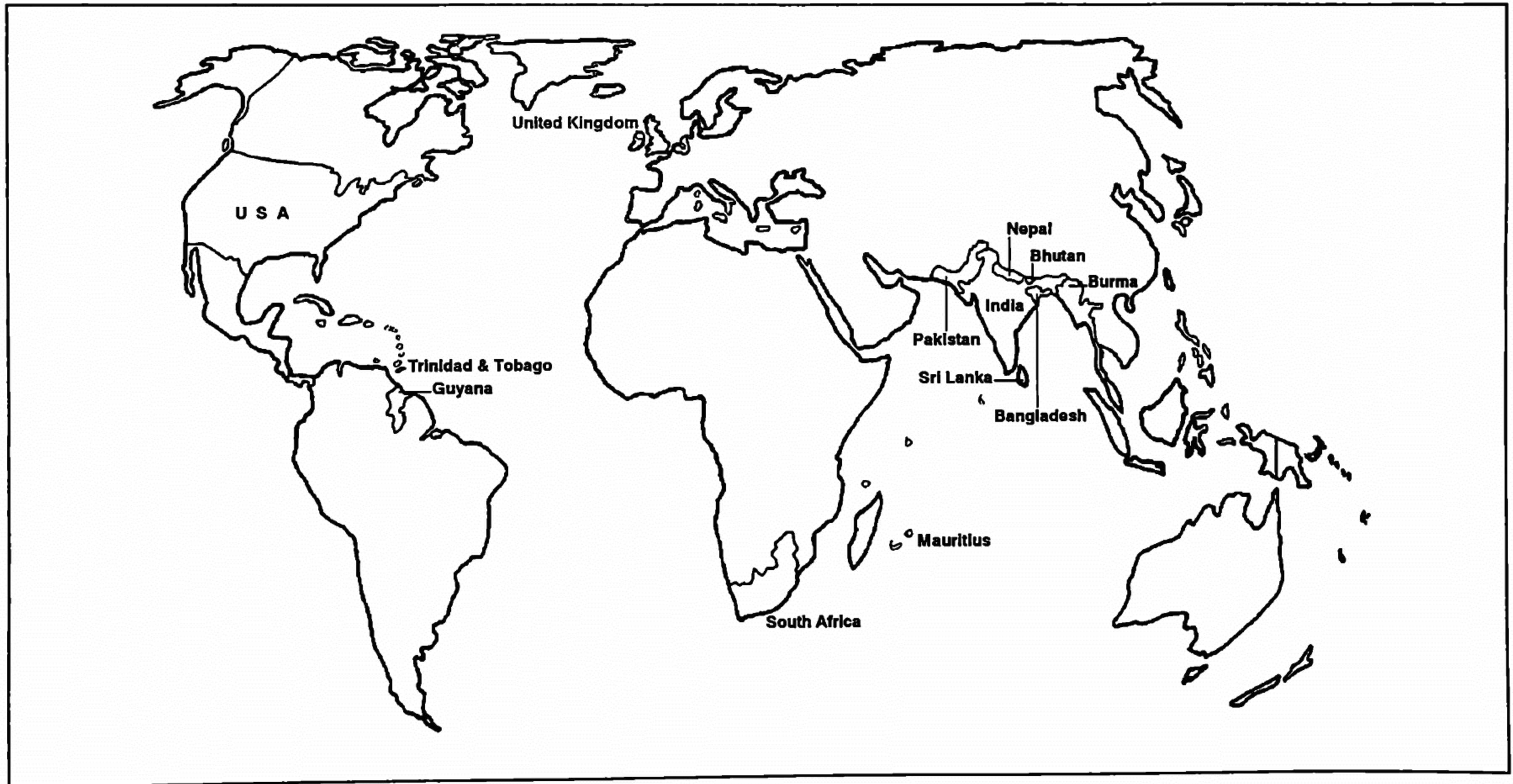
Map 2: Hindus around the world

This map and the table alongside show the countries which have more than 300,000 Hindu people (figures in brackets show the number *in thousands*). Recent decades have seen more and more Hindus living and worshipping outside India.

India (700,000)
Nepal (17,000)
Bangladesh (15,000)
Sri Lanka (2,500)
Pakistan (1,250)
South Africa (700)
USA (575)

Mauritius (500)
United Kingdom (500)
Guyana (370)
Bhutan (350)
Burma (325)
Trinidad & Tobago (300)

In Britain, there are large Hindu communities in cities such as Birmingham, Coventry, Leicester and Manchester. In London, many Hindus live in Harrow and Wembley. There are more than 130 Hindu mandirs (places of worship) in Britain.



GOD AS ONE AND MANY

With the notable exception of Buddhism, the central concept of the major faiths is the concept of God. As soon as we begin to use words about God, however, we run into difficulties because we are attempting to describe the indescribable. This is why all religions are driven to use forms of expression which are more akin to poetry than to scientific or legal definitions.

Questions to ask about God

How can we imagine or speak about God?

What do believers understand by 'God' in this tradition?

What do believers mean when they speak of 'knowing' God?

How might we describe a God who is the source of the infinite variety of the universe, yet also the source of its essential unity?

GOD AS ONE AND MANY

The one universal spirit in many aspects

Hinduism is full of stories of hundreds of gods and goddesses and lesser celestial beings who inhabit the heavens and earth. Yet most Hindus believe that God is One. Westerners are often baffled by this apparent contradiction or paradox, but it can be simply explained.

There is a story in the Upanishads, one of the oldest and most beautiful collections of Hindu scriptures, which helps us to understand this paradox better. A twelve-year-old boy called Svetaketu is sent by his father into the forest to learn the scriptures from his Brahmin teachers. At the age of twenty-four he returns home full of conceit because he now possesses the sacred knowledge of the ancient Vedas. His father realises that although his son has learned the scriptures he still does not understand the nature of God (Brahman). He gives his son some salt and asks him to put it in a glass of water and bring it to him the next day.

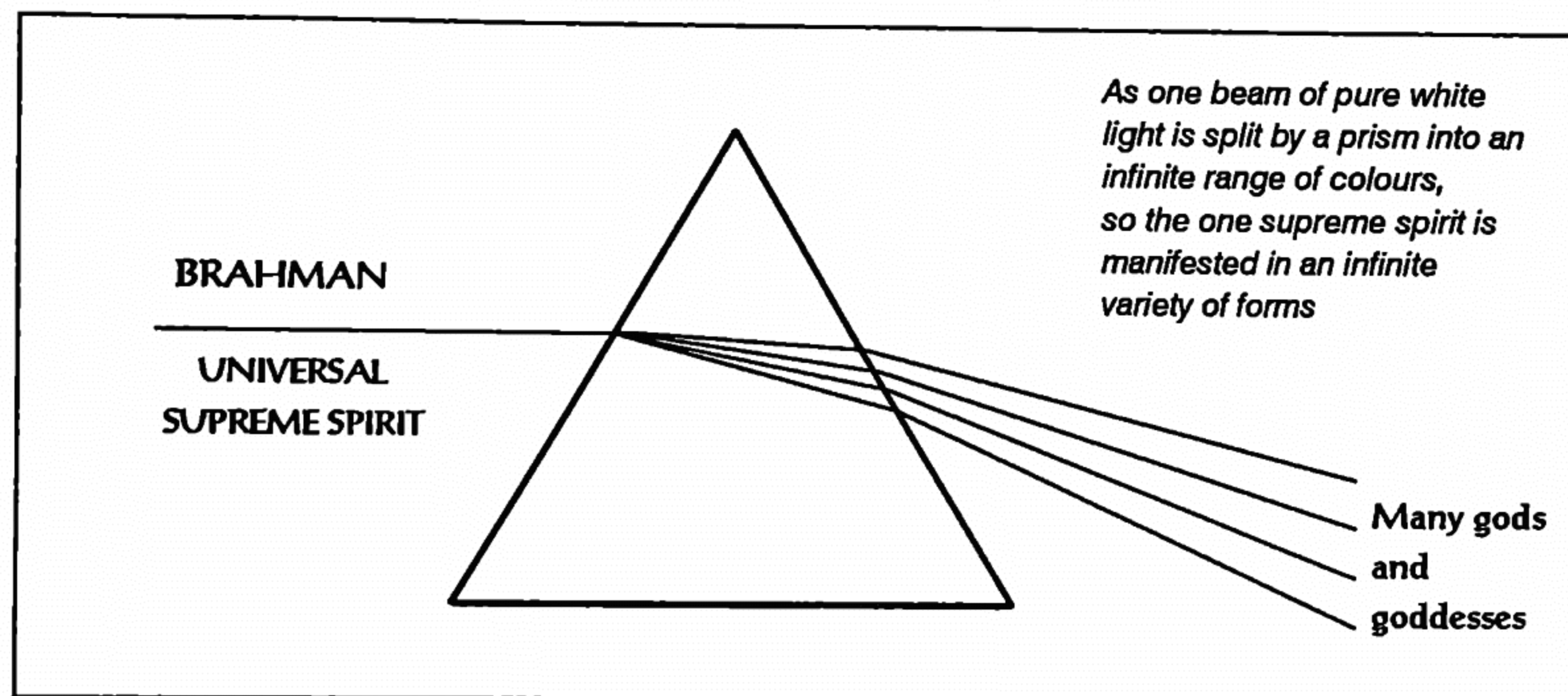
In the morning Svetaketu's father asks his son to bring him the salt. The young man looks for the salt but cannot find it because it has all dissolved. His father asks him to sip the water and then inquires how it tastes. 'Salty, sir', is the reply. 'Pour some away', orders the father, 'and drink again. How does it taste?' 'Salty, sir', is the reply. 'Pour the rest away', orders the father, 'and taste from the bottom of the glass. How is it?' 'Salty, sir.' 'In the same way my son', says the father, 'you may not see the pure Being which pervades the universe, but it is there. That Being which is the essence of everything that

is, the Supreme reality, the self of all that exists, that you are, Svetaketu.' (The Chandogya Upanishad gives many other illustrations in story form of how Brahman permeates the universe).

This Supreme Spirit which Hindus sometimes refer to as 'Ultimate Reality' is called Brahman. Brahman is the great One hidden in all creatures so that this whole world and all creation is Brahman. Each person or animal or tree or stone embodies something of Brahman. The gods and goddesses above all creatures, put this impersonal universal spirit into a personal focus which human beings can understand. Professor Ninian Smart has likened this idea to the experiment where a single beam of white light is refracted into many colours by a prism.

For most Hindus, their many gods and goddesses display 'aspects' or 'refractions' of Brahman. It is impossible, say many Hindus, for us to worship such a vast, abstract, impersonal Universal Spirit. As human beings, we need to focus on more human-like aspects of the Divine One. It is as if the prism of this world 'refracts' the single pure beam of Brahman into the many colourful sacred stories of gods and goddesses which Hindus hold so dear to their hearts and which help them to come close to Brahman.

Each of us has many aspects. Your mother shows a motherly image to you (sometimes that is gentle and loving and sometimes it can be terrifying!) but to your grandfather she is a daughter and to your father she is a wife, to your children she will be a grandmother and at work she may be an employee or a boss. In a similar way Hindu mythology shows different aspects of the Divine One.



Brahman In all things

Brahman 'permeates' all things, and can be found all around us. The Divine One can take on numberless forms. Brahman is the source of all creation, and is both male and female, though many Hindus happily use 'he' to describe God. Many millions of Hindus begin their day with a prayer to the sun expressed in the ancient Gayatri Mantra.

*Aum, let us meditate on
The radiance of the Divine (Savitri)
May it inspire and illumine
our intellects.*

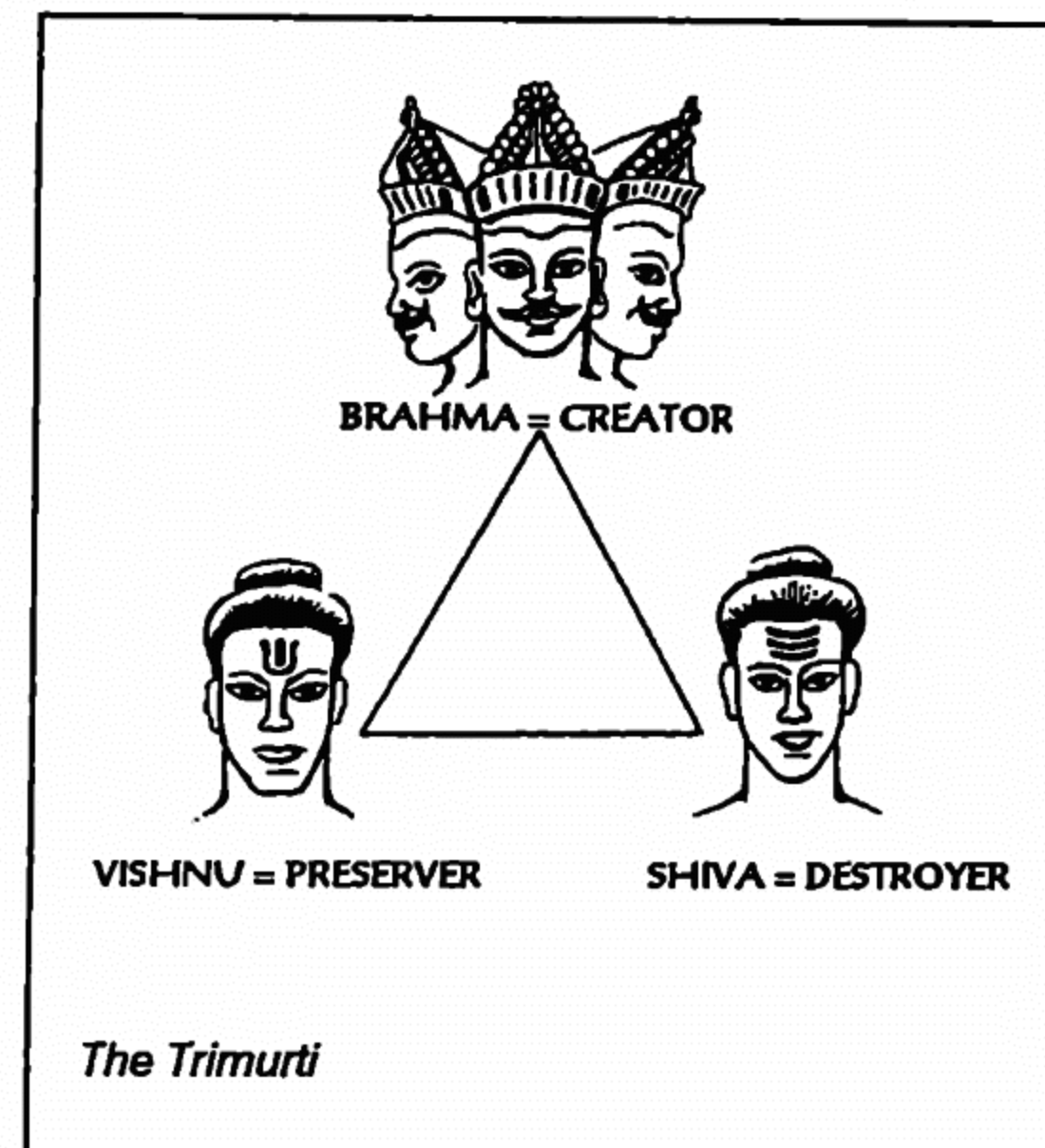
The Hindu texts claim that there are 330,000,000 gods and goddesses whilst others claim that there are thirty-three. For Hindus, the exact number of gods is not important because 'all gods lead to God as all rivers lead to the sea.'

Rivers and the sea are considered sacred by Hindus and bathing in them has a purifying power. Many Hindus find that the images in their temples help them to focus their attention on aspects of Brahman and on the gods and goddesses. Modern Hinduism has a particularly high place for three of the gods: Brahma, the creator, Vishnu, the preserver, and Shiva, the destroyer. These are known as the Trimurti (the word means 'three forms').

Vishnu and Shiva have many followers but Brahma has few. His wife or consort Saraswati, the goddess of speech, learning and music, is more commonly worshipped in temples.

Three strands of worshippers

Hinduism is made up of many intertwined and complex religious systems. There are three broad groupings of worshippers in Hinduism which are commonly



recognised. Many Hindus take Lord Vishnu as their supreme deity and his followers are called Vaishnavites. You can sometimes recognise Vaishnavites by the markings on their foreheads like the ones on Vishnu's forehead in the triangular diagram.

Another group of worshippers takes Lord Shiva as its supreme deity. These devotees are called Shaivites or Shaivas and can sometimes be recognised by three horizontal markings on their foreheads, which are often made with ashes.

Another group takes the mother goddess Devi as its supreme deity. She takes many different aspects; some loving and graceful, others aggressive and terrifying.

VISHNU AND HIS WIFE

Vaishnavites take Vishnu as the supreme deity and honour him as the preserver and protector of the world order. He looks out on the world and wherever he sees trouble brewing, he descends to earth as an *avatar* (literally 'to descend into'). Appearing as an animal or human, he destroys wickedness and restores goodness to its rightful place.

Vaishnavites see Vishnu as the ruler of all the universe. He is often pictured resting on a snake called Shesha (or Ananta) in the middle of the ocean. Shesha's coils form a seat for Vishnu and the snake's seven heads create a canopy over Vishnu's head. You can recognise Vishnu because he carries a conch shell in one hand and a lotus in another, a club in his third hand and a discus in the fourth. The U-shaped marking on Vishnu's forehead is copied today by his followers as a symbol of their devotion. In pictures, Vishnu's skin is often blue and his snake throne is purple.

His consort is Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth and good fortune. She is represented as a beautiful, golden woman standing or sitting on a lotus. She is often worshipped sitting alongside Vishnu on a lotus or travelling with him on Garuda, the King of the birds. Garuda, the mythical eagle-like bird and mount of the Lord Vishnu devours evil. The name Garuda means 'devourer'. Stories about Garuda can be found in the Mahabharata.

The majority of Hindus in Britain are Vaishnavites which means that they focus their worship on Vishnu although usually this is in the form of one of his *avatars* particularly Krishna or Rama.



Vishnu and Lakshmi

THE TEN AVATARS OF VISHNU

Traditionally Vishnu has ten *avatars* (meaning 'one who descends') who appear to rescue the world from wickedness from time to time. Here we have illustrated four of them.

Rama of Ayodhya (Ramachandra)

Rama, the seventh incarnation of Vishnu is one of the most popular and important of the Vaishnava gods and the hero of a great Indian epic poem, the Ramayana. The poem which is told in 24,000 couplets in seven books, recounts the adventures of Rama in repossessing his throne and kingdom after being exiled by his father. His wife, Sita, is kidnapped by the demon king Ravana. Her rescue and the return of Sita and Rama to their rightful kingdom is celebrated annually by Hindus in their great festivals of Dassehra and Diwali. Throughout India actors, dancers, singers and story-tellers retell the epic story of Rama's courage, valour and virtue. At the heart of the story is the love of Rama and Sita for each other. Sita's faithfulness and devotion to Rama displays one ideal of womanhood in Indian culture.

Hanuman – the monkey god

Hanuman is not one of Vishnu's avatars. He is the monkey god and son of the wind and is worshipped as a god of strength, health and agility throughout India. Devotees of Rama see Hanuman as a model of how they should be in their devotion to God. Hanuman plays an important role in the epic Ramayana story where he leads Rama's army

against the wicked demon Ravana, the king of Lanka who abducted Sita. Another well known story tells how when Lakshmana, Rama's brother, lay dying in the war, Hanuman was commanded to

collect herbs from the Himalayas to revive him. Not being certain of the correct herb, Hanuman lifted a whole mountain and brought it to Rama, thus saving the life of his brother.

Rama and Sita, led by Hanuman carrying the mountain



Krishna

Krishna is probably the most popular *avatar* of Vishnu and stories about him abound in Hinduism. For some worshippers, he is the source of all the other *avatars*. He is often worshipped as a baby and there are many stories telling of his marvellous miracles and pranks. As a handsome youth, he escapes from the threats of his wicked uncle, Kamsa, the king of Mathura. Krishna lives among the cowherds in Vrindaban where he charms the hearts of the cowgirls (*gopis*) and accompanies their moonlight dancing with his divine flute playing. As divine flute-player and as Govinda ('finder of cattle'), another name by which he is commonly known, he is the focus of much love and devotion throughout India. Radha, his favourite *gopi*, is often worshipped and they are shown together in paintings and *murtis* (images). Krishna returns to Mathura and destroys his wicked uncle Kamsa, restoring the kingdom to its rightful owner, and once again the world is saved from evil. Many stories of Krishna are recounted in the greatest epic poem of India, the Mahabharata, which is four times longer than the Ramayana. At the heart of the Mahabharata is a poem called the Bhagavad Gita ('The Song of the Lord') in which Krishna gives Arjuna, one of the five sons of King Pandu, much of the teaching which lies at the very heart of modern Hinduism. You can read stories about Lord Krishna in many Hindu story books.

Krishna literally means black, or 'one who attracts' and he is often painted as a black or blue-black god. He offers an attractive and very complete picture of God and can be worshipped by his followers as a child, a father, a friend and an elder brother as well as a flute-playing lover, husband and son.



Krishna and Radha

The Buddha



The Buddha

The Hindu tradition recognises that Siddhartha Gautama, who became the Buddha, rescued the world from evil. Siddhartha founded the Buddhist religion and his inclusion among the *avatars* of Vishnu illustrates the way in which Hinduism embraces other faiths and includes rather than excludes other religious groups. Pictures of the Buddha can often be seen in Hindu mandirs.

Kalki



Kalki

Vishnu's tenth and last *avatar* will be known as Kalki and is yet to come. When the world has degenerated to its lowest point, Vishnu will appear in person on earth as Kalki. Riding a white horse with his arms aloft brandishing a blazing sword, he will accomplish the final destruction of wickedness, reward the good and prepare for the renewal of creation.

SHIVA AND HIS FAMILY

For his devotees (Shaivas or Shaivites), Shiva is the Supreme Lord who brings together opposites, because he represents both destruction and creation, good and evil, austerity and exuberance, benevolence and ferocity. He is often pictured sitting on Mount Kailasa in the Himalayas where he lives a life of great asceticism, renouncing all worldly goods. He is seen as the Lord of Yoga for he sits on a tiger's skin absorbed in meditation. He has three eyes through which he can see times past, present and future. The frontal eye is the inward-looking eye of meditation which, if directed outwards, burns up all that appears before it. He is the Lord of Time and carries the moon on his matted hair above his forehead. He is often beautifully represented in Indian art as the cosmic dancer, Nataraja, beating out the rhythm of the universe with his small hour-glass shaped drum and stamping out evil.

His beautiful consort, Parvati, is said to be the daughter of the Himalayas. Shiva is the Lord of Death and Destruction. He wears a serpent around his neck and carries a noose and a garland of skulls. From the crown of his matted hair flows the River Ganges, the symbol of purity. His vehicle is Nandi ('joyful'), a bull as white as snow. His city is Kashi (Benares or Varanasi) the city of light and knowledge.

He is called Lord of the Universe, Mountain Lord, Bearer of the Ganges, Three-eyed, Blue-throated, Moon-crested. In temples he is often represented by a symbol called a Shivalinga. In this, Shiva represents the masculine principle: he is the Lord of Sexuality. Parvati, his partner, represents the female principle as mother nature. For



Shiva

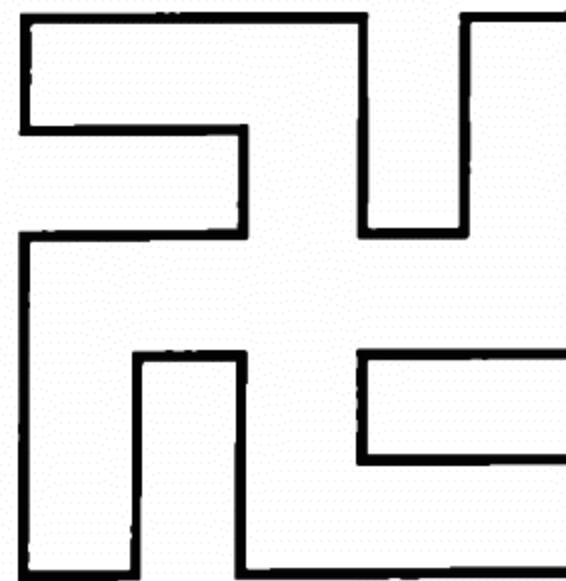
his followers Shiva is Lord of all. At the festival of Shivaratri (the night sacred to Shiva) in February or early March, worship of Shiva goes on throughout the night.

Ganesha

Ganesha, the elephant-headed god, is one of the most popular Hindu gods. He is seen as the remover of obstacles and the god of good luck as well as the patron of learning, wealth and success. Traditionally he is worshipped first in any Hindu ritual and he is often to be found at the entrance to homes and temples. Being the remover of obstacles, he is seen as the 'Lord of Beginnings' and so he finds pride of place at the start of new ventures such as weddings and house-warmings. He is seen as the son of Shiva and Parvati and there are many stories about how he came to have an elephant's head on such a rotund human body. He is depicted as having four arms and a single tusk and is usually accompanied by a rat or a mouse which is said to be his vehicle. It may seem strange to think of an elephant riding a mouse but the symbolism seems to be linking the macrocosm with the microcosm in a sacred formula.

The Swastika

The swastika in the West is associated with Hitler and the rise of the Nazi party in Germany earlier this century. In fact, the symbol has a far longer history as a very ancient Indian symbol of good luck and good fortune, often associated by Hindus with Lord Ganesha. It is often found in Hindu homes and on entrances to buildings to protect against evil. It is a simple diagram or *yantra* bringing all directions into a unity or wholeness. Some Hindus say it shows different paths to the centre, none of them straight.



Ganesha

THE GODDESS DEVI

One of the most ancient strands of Hindu worship is devoted to seeing god as the Great Mother (Mahadevi) who is often identified as Parvati, Shiva's consort. In Hindu thinking, strength or energy (*shakti*) is seen as a female concept and each of the gods has a consort representing his energy. Parvati is seen as being the Universal Mother who has unlimited power. She is worshipped in many different aspects, some gentle and gracious, and others powerful and terrifying.

Durga, for example, is depicted as riding on a lion and wielding weapons which reflect her power and strength.

Vishnu's consort, Lakshmi, is more benevolent, being the goddess of beauty, good fortune and wealth; gold coins fall from her hands in generosity (see page 27).

Brahma's consort, Saraswati, is the goddess of eloquence, learning, wisdom and music. She is often seen holding a stringed instrument (the vina). She is known by many different names including Savitri and Gayatri and is mentioned daily by Hindus who repeat the Gayatri mantra.

Some stories describe jealousy between Lakshmi (wealth) and Saraswati (wisdom) but their shared love for God brings them together. Hindus point out from this story how wisdom can bring wealth, and wealth can give power to wisdom.

Saraswati





Durga

Durga

Durga is a widely worshipped fierce form of Devi. Myths describe how she appeared before the gods as a virgin beauty with ten arms and how the gods each delivered their weapons, the symbols of their power, to her. Vishnu gave her his discus and Shiva his trident. With these weapons she became the slayer of many demons. Her vehicle is a lion. She is a goddess particularly popular in Bengal where Durga Puja (late September – early October) is one of the most spectacular festivals of the year.



Kali

Kali (the black one)

One of the most formidable forms of the goddess is Kali who is death personified. She is depicted as black and half naked. She is a goddess of cremation grounds. Her mouth hangs open and her long tongue protrudes, dripping blood. Unusually in Hinduism, she is sometimes worshipped with animal sacrifices for she confronts Hindus with the hair-raising, horrifying aspect of reality.

Why do Hindus have this apparently horrible and gruesome image of the divine? Kali reminds her

followers of the reality of suffering and death, fear and despair – all aspects of life which have to be faced. Her devotees approach her for protection from these dark dimensions of experience. Kali is popular in Bengal where she is associated with the night and darkness. In the image above we see her in a wild, terrifying, hysterical dance from which only Lord Shiva can calm her down by laying himself before her. When she realises who it is she is trampling on, she is astonished and ceases her dance and the spread of terror.

SPIRITUAL LEADERS

In every faith there are spiritual leaders who inspire and guide the community. These may be historical figures, known through scripture or other documentary evidence, or they may be contemporary figures. The Hindu religion has no known founders. Over the thousands of years of its development, the tradition has been continuously refreshed by the teaching, example and inspiration of *gurus* (who teach) *sadhus* (who renounce the world for holy living, setting an example) and *rishis* (who pass on the wisdom of the gods). So, among British Hindus today, spiritual leaders are often living gurus, who work within the community to present the ancient tradition with contemporary vitality.

Questions to ask about spiritual leaders

Spiritual leaders inspire trust in their followers. What qualities might inspire this trust?

What sort of person would you trust?

Many Hindu spiritual leaders have continued to inspire trust and devotion long after their deaths. Why do you think this is?

What would you expect of a spiritual leader, as opposed to any other kind of leader?

Hinduism has many *gurus*, *sadhus* and *rishis*. What does this tell you about the religion?

We have chosen three examples to illustrate how the British Hindu community is inspired by spiritual leaders.



Sathya Sai Baba

SAI BABA

Some British Hindus follow Sai Baba, who was born in Andhra Pradesh in 1926 and became the leader

of a Hindu group. He is revered for his saintly spirituality and his remarkable or miraculous insight. Followers use his picture in daily *puja* (worship), and might travel to his *ashram*, or community, which is called 'the home of peace.' His photographs show him dressed in orange robes and with a striking halo of dark black hair framing a face often wreathed in smiles. Followers of Sai Baba revere him as a reincarnation of saints from earlier times, and seek to follow his values, which are identified as truth, right conduct, peace, love and non-violence. There are several ordinary houses in Britain, in which Sai Baba's miracle of making ash materialise has been observed. These houses are centres of devotion for his followers. The name means 'true mother and father' and identifies Sai Baba with both Shiva and Shakti. Through children's classes called Bal Vikas (child blossoming) followers pass on Sai Baba's values of truth, non-violence, peace and love.

JALARAM BAPU

Shri Jalaram Bapu was a famous nineteenth century devotee of Rama, from the town of Virpur in Gujarat. He is widely revered in the British Hindu community today, particularly among those of Gujarati origin. The Shree Jalaram Prarthana Mandal in Leicester is a place where Jalaram Bapu is honoured. Other British cities also have mandirs in his name. Stories tell of his complete trust in God and his kindness and generosity. He is often pictured carrying a stick. The story says that Jalaram Bapu's wife helped an old man by accompanying him on his journey. The saint trusted God, and did not object to his wife taking a journey with an unknown



man. The stranger disappeared into a river, but handed back the stick which Jalaram Bapu had lent him; the old man was actually Lord Rama, testing the trust of the saint. Followers of Jalaram Bapu often pray to him for miracles, and travel great distances to honour and thank him in temples dedicated to him when their prayers are answered.

MOTHER SHYAMA

Mother Shyama of Mathura was born in 1916 in the town honoured as the birthplace of Krishna. She has become widely known in Britain and India as a visionary follower of Krishna, and has established a mandir, called the Radhakrishna Temple, in Balham, south London. Her marriage was childless, and she took the advice of a guru to live on only a cup of milk each day for six months, seeking the blessing of Krishna. After six months of prayer, she asked one thing of God, not a child, but to be able to live a life devoted to Krishna. She has popularised the singing and chanting of *kirtans* or songs of praise as a way of deepening personal devotion to Krishna. She is credited with many miracles, some humorous in the style of Lord Krishna. She also founded a hospital at Vrindaban, which provides free medical care to all.



COMMUNITY

Religions create communities of faith, based on shared beliefs and values. Those who follow the same faith share an ultimate vision of life. But religions also offer a vision of community which goes beyond the faith, to all humanity, or all that lives. For Hindus this community dimension of religion is expressed in many ways. The extended family, the caste or *jati* group within which the family practises its trade or work, makes real the community in which each individual participates. And the great pilgrimages and festival celebrations enable the 'I' to be united with a huge Hindu 'we' in worship and celebration.

Questions to ask about community

What makes a faith group into a community? Would you say shared beliefs, common experiences, hopes or rituals are important? How do people grow into strong religious identities?

What does a faith community do for a believer? What does it demand from a believer?

Some Hindus live in an *ashram* (religious community) to help their spiritual development. How might this community living change a person's life?

FAMILY, ASHRAMS, VARNA AND JATI

Family

Family ties are given great importance by many Hindu people. The family is the basic community in which children learn the practices and teachings of the faith, which are very often passed on by the mother. The family is also a worshipping community, where daily *puja* and sharing *prashad* are part of life together. Family ties are often broad, with the extended family deeply involved in life together. When a marriage occurs, it is the woman who moves into the extended family of her new husband; here she will often defer to her mother-in-law. Traditionally, older men have taken leadership of the family, and the status of other family members has depended upon their seniority. For example, a woman's status is increased by bearing children or by becoming a mother-in-law. Childcare and home life are often considered the woman's sphere of influence, but many British Hindu women have careers of their own, and increasingly in India women have paid work outside the home as well as their domestic responsibilities.

Ashrams and satsung groups

An *ashram* is a place where people seeking spiritual development live. They may be hermits, or they may live in community. Unlike the family, people can choose to join an *ashram*, in which they may seek opportunities to develop their devotion, their meditation or their knowledge of Hindu teaching. Many Hindu leaders have set up an *ashram* for their followers; Gandhi lived in community for sixteen

years at his 'Satyagraha Ashram' near Ahmedabad, and Sathya Sai Baba has an *ashram* called Prasanthi Nilayam ('abode of peace') in Andhra Pradesh. Many Hindus who live in their families participate in *ashrams* on an occasional basis. Community religious life is also strengthened by study groups, often called *satsung* groups, in which Hindus meet regularly to read the scriptures and develop their faith. These can be found in many British towns with a Hindu community. Other groups meet, for example on a Sunday afternoon, to sing *bhajans* together. Community life often centres on the temple, where daily *arti* ceremonies bring people together for reasons of worship and friendship.

The related word *ashrama* refers to one of the four stages of life for Hindus. The four *ashramas* are the life of a student, a householder, a retired person in pursuit of truth and a person who renounces the world.

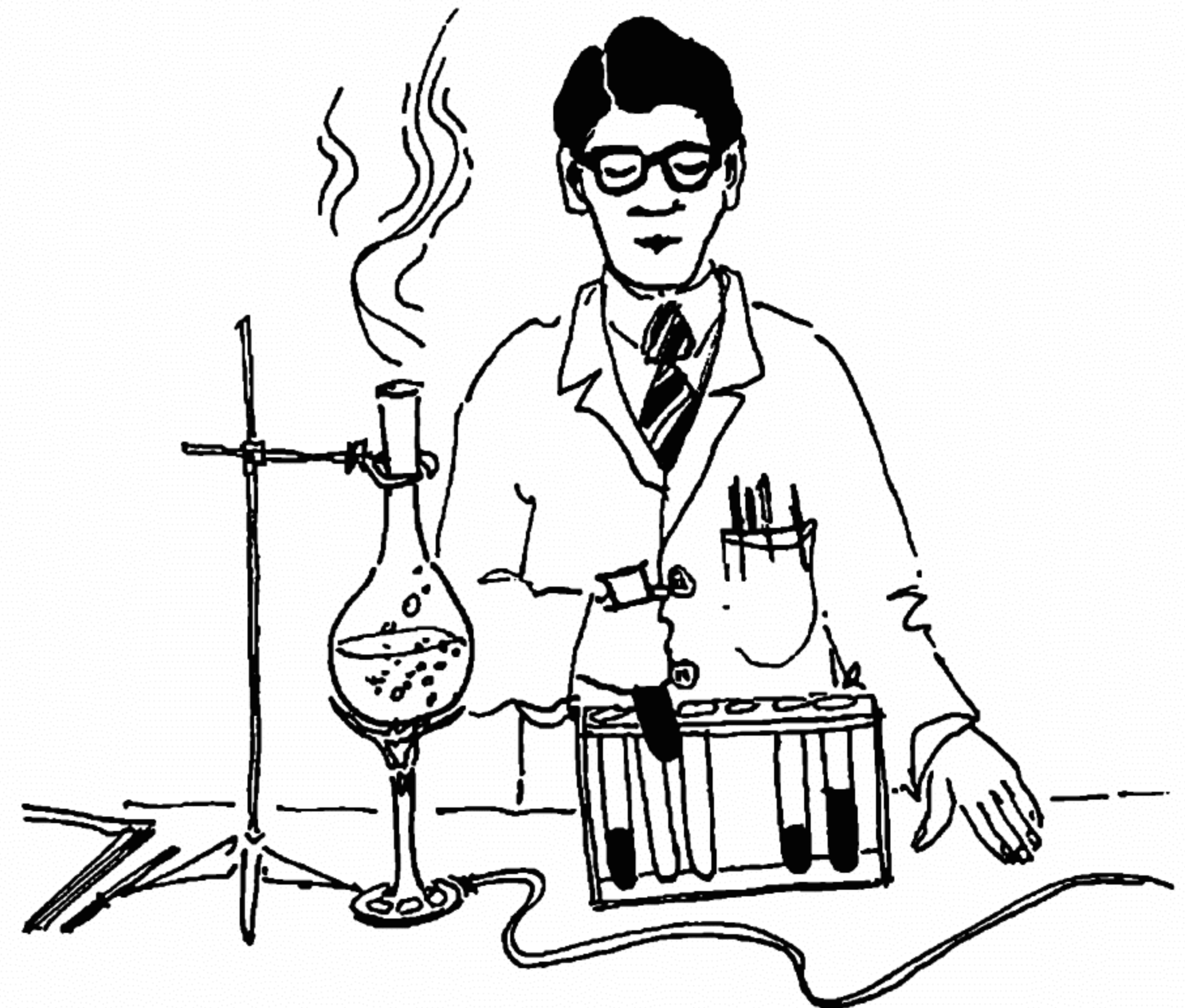
Varna and jati (caste groups)

These terms are often both translated as 'caste' but this is not helpful. *Varna* refers to the four principal groups within Hindu society, which have historically given structure and function to people's lives. *Varna* is an important idea in Hindu scripture, illustrating the concept of *dharma*, the intrinsic roles and duties of the life to which one is born. The four *varnas* are traditionally associated with the roles of priests, warriors, traders and servants. Some see the 'outcaste' peoples as a fifth *varna* (they are also known as *dalits*, *harijans* or untouchables); these people are equal in law, but often remain oppressed. Their work, for example with dead bodies, leads many other Hindus to perceive them as impure.

Jati groups are divisions within society based on shared ancestry, geographical location, work and marriage ties. It is occupation which usually unites a *jati* group, in a particular village. Estimates vary, but there might be three thousand

different *jati* groups in India. *Jati* means 'birth' but an individual's marriage is also likely to be within the *jati* to which they were born. The *jati* group has a major social and cultural role, supporting the families which make it up in a

particular village setting. As pupils learn about the four *varnas* and the idea of caste, they might be encouraged to think about their own experience of family and community, and the ways that their own society is structured in hierarchies.



Different occupations, such as potter or scientist, are often undertaken by particular jati groups

LIVING THE FAITH

Members of all religions often impress upon outside observers that their faith is a 'way of life' not just a creed or even a code of ethics. Living the faith includes worship, pilgrimage, philosophy and belief. The faith is lived out, in ritual and in action, but is also lived within, in meditation and reflection. For Hindus, both of these aspects are important, expressed through (for example) what is eaten, through how one speaks and behaves in the face of wrong, and through how one feels towards the creature or person who suffers. There are three recognised paths to spiritual fulfilment for Hindus: devotion, service and knowledge. These may lead to living faith in many different styles.

Questions to ask about living the faith

If you want to discover whether a person lives out their faith, what would you look for? What outward signs of living the faith might be seen? Could a person be living the faith without it showing in what they did?

What do you think would be the least a Hindu person could do to live out the faith? What are the minimum requirements?

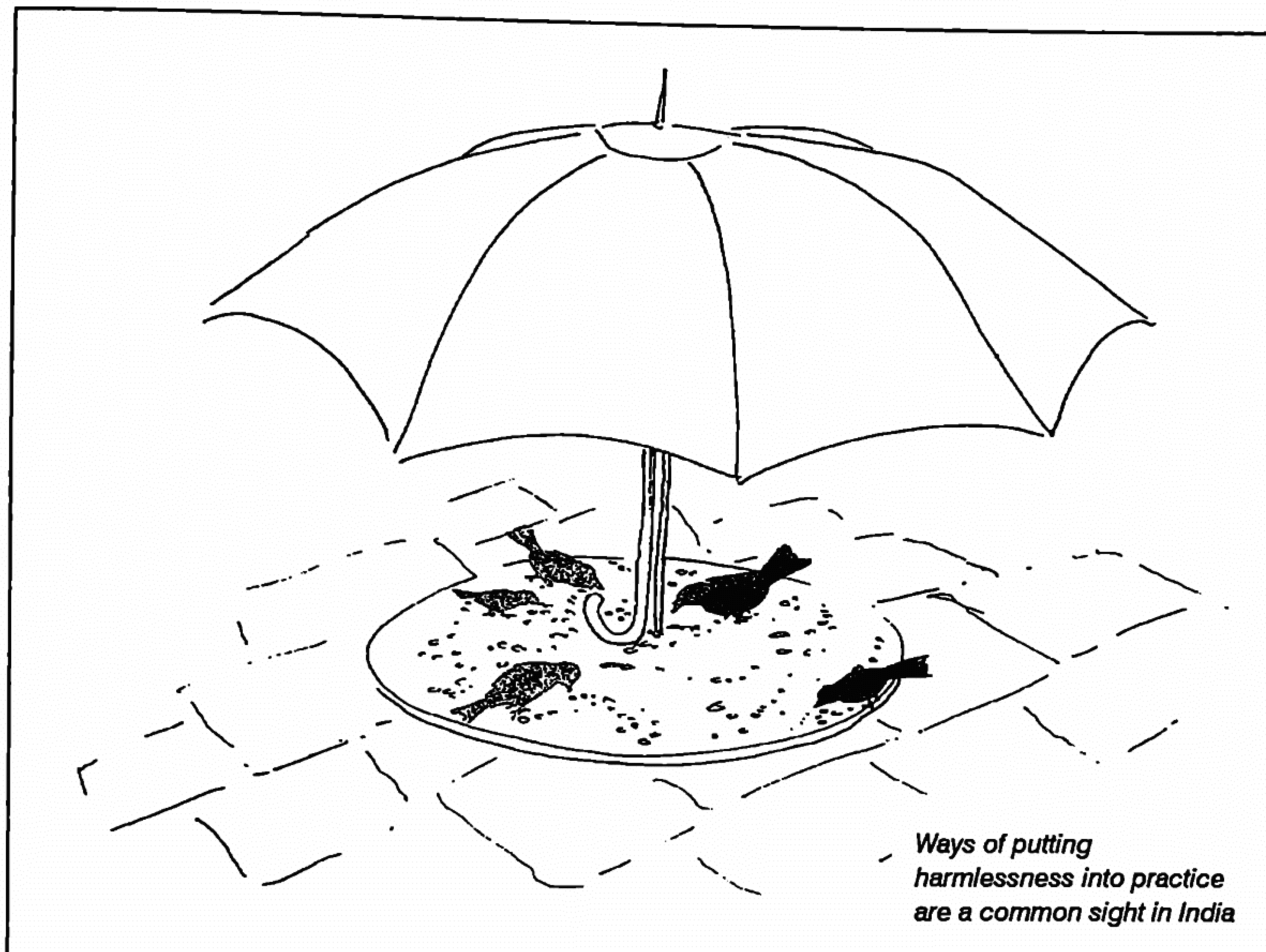
What seems to be meant by living a devoted life, a life of service or a life seeking knowledge? What do you think of these different paths for spiritual life?



FOOD

Hindu people choose a variety of foods. Some foods are rejected by some Hindus for various ethical reasons.

Very many Hindus avoid beef, or any product of a dead cow. The sacred status of the cow reflects all that cows can give to people as living animals: dairy products, milk, yoghurt and butter. Respecting the sanctity of the cow is a thanksgiving for the bounty of nature.



Many Hindus also choose a vegetarian diet, so that nothing they eat involves killing. Others will eat fish, but not meat from any mammal. Some are more strict with themselves, and avoid eggs as well, living mostly from grains, vegetables and pulses. Indian cookery, which has developed in a Hindu context, creates great variety and flavour for the vegetarian. The reasons for these choices can be found in Hindu teaching about life:

*Whoever sees the one Spirit in all,
and all in the one Spirit,
from then on cannot look with contempt
on any creature.*

Students can follow their interest in this subject by collecting menus from restaurants which serve Indian food, and comparing the range of food available for vegans, vegetarians and meat eaters.

They might also try some Indian cooking, or some Indian sweets, which are often used in worship.

FASTING

One aspect of Hindu spiritual discipline is to develop self control over the body. This includes the ability to abstain for a time from food and from other bodily pleasures such as sex, for the development of spiritual discipline. This is a basic reason why many Hindus, particularly in their later years, may often fast. Ascetic practice is the final stage of life in Hinduism: after a youthful time of learning, and raising a family as a householder, many Hindus aspire to the life of a religious hermit, and some to the total renunciation of a Sannyasin. For these, a total fast might include all drinks other than water, or a partial fast might involve eating very little, and very plain food for a longer period. Gandhi was famous for his fasting, which he believed would encourage others to follow the path of non-violence.

NON-VIOLENCE AND COMPASSION

The virtue of non-violence (*ahimsa*, also translated harmlessness) has a long tradition in India, and Hindus aspire to *ahimsa* along with Buddhists and Jains. The determination to do no violence may arise in response to a sense of the oneness of all living things, which is close to the heart of Hindu belief. An active compassion for any suffering creature may lead Hindu devotees to take special care of people who are weak or vulnerable, and of creatures who need human help.

LIFE AS JOURNEY

The idea that life is a spiritual journey is common in many religions and so in the Hindu community the key moments of a person's spiritual journey through life may be marked by ceremony, ritual, festivity or other religious observance. Hindu teaching says that we have come from previous incarnations, and are on our way to further rebirths, so this is just one stage of our journey, whose ultimate goal is the union with God, Brahman, for which these embodied lives prepare us. Aware of the transitory and illusory nature of this life, many Hindus find the metaphor of life as a journey powerful and fruitful. Those who ask themselves, 'Where have I come from? Where am I going?' may live life to the full in the present.

Questions to ask about life as journey

What have been the big moments in my life so far? What will be the biggest days of my life in the future?

In what ways would I like to change? Can I change myself?

What wisdom can I find to be my guide or map on the journey of life?

Hindus believe in the spiral of rebirth. What differences might this make to their journeys through life?

BEHIND THE VISIBLE JOURNEY

Within Hinduism it is easy to identify various features which mark the progress of an individual through life, in particular the four *ashramas* (stages of life) and the sixteen *samskars* (specific rituals which may be undertaken at particular points). To concentrate exclusively on these however would be to ignore the most important sense in which life for a Hindu is a journey – the continuing cyclical journey from birth to rebirth and eventually, it is hoped, to *moksha* or ultimate liberation.

This can only be illustrated diagrammatically and one possible representation of it is shown opposite. It is inevitably a simplification of the richness and complexity of Hindu beliefs but it may serve to establish some of the key concepts.

It begins with the self which is derived from Brahman, the ultimate reality. There are differing views within Hinduism as to whether the self can be regarded as separate from Brahman or whether it is to be seen as part of Brahman. Whereas the Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Christianity and Islam) make a clear distinction between God as Creator and that which he has created, in Hinduism this distinction is less clear and sometimes non-existent.

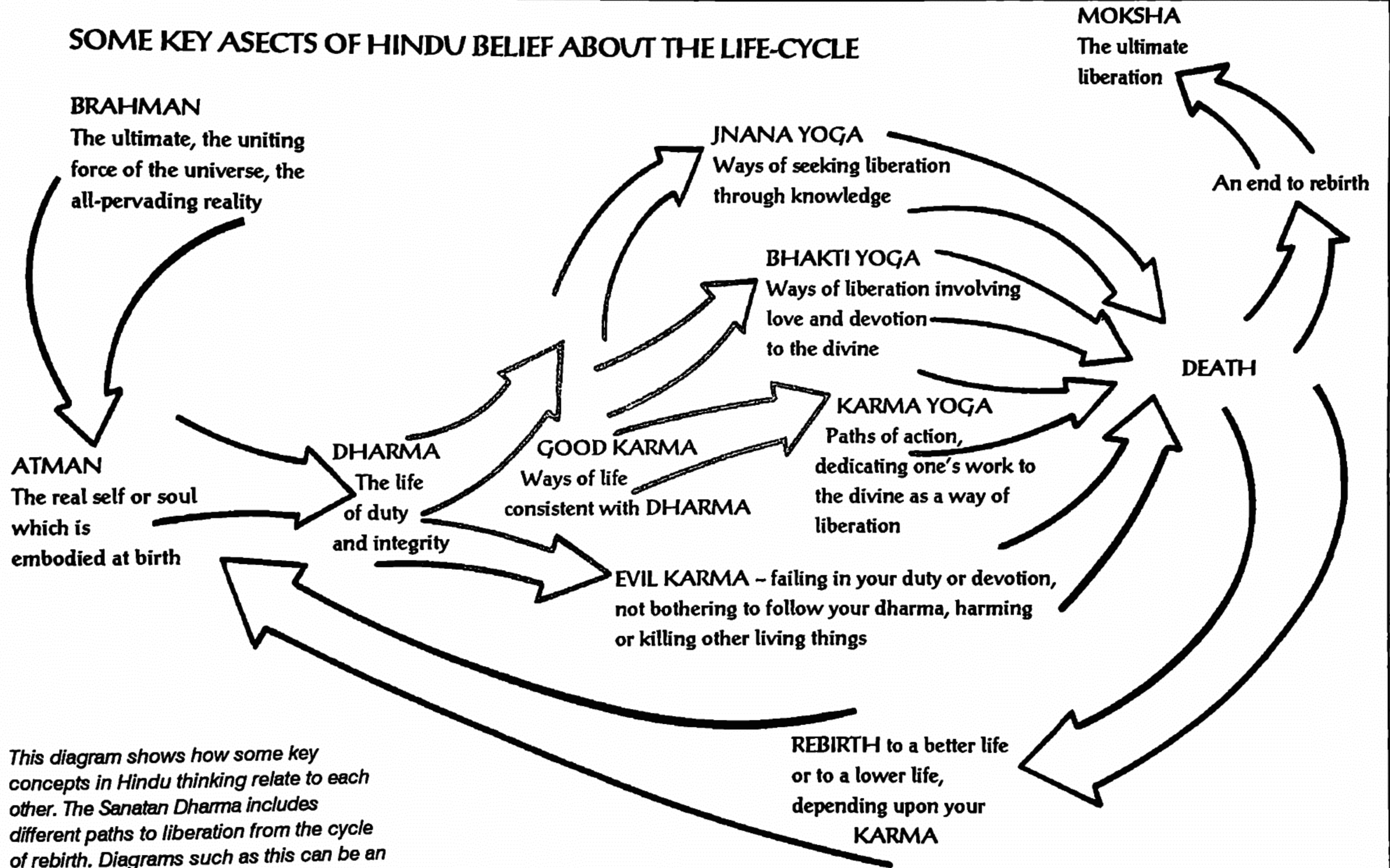
The duty of all individuals is to follow their *dharma*. This is a key term for understanding Hinduism but the usual translations – 'religion' or 'religious duty' or simply 'duty' – do not do full justice to its meaning. One way in which it has been described is 'behaving in accordance with your essential nature'. Thus

righteousness is achieved by being what we are truly meant to be. This will vary from individual to individual so it is not to be expected that everyone will see their 'duty' as the same. Following one's *dharma* leads to good *karma*.

Karma likewise is a key term which is not easily translated. Its literal meaning is simply 'action' but it implies both actions and their consequences – the law of cause and effect. Every time we make a moral choice we become a different person, and this in turn influences all our future choices. Our actions as we go through life make us what we are – they determine our *karma*. It is our state of *karma* at the time of death which determines whether we are reborn to a higher or lower life. The ultimate hope is to achieve *moksha* – liberation from the cycle of birth and rebirth.

Hinduism does not prescribe a single path to liberation but suggests a variety of paths under the general term *yoga*, meaning 'union with the divine'. Such union can be achieved through the pursuit of knowledge (*jnana yoga*), through love and devotion (*bhakti yoga*) or through action (*karma yoga*). The three paths are not, of course, exclusive. In the West the term *yoga* has come to be associated with a particular form, *hatha yoga*, which emphasises bodily control, and the essentially spiritual intention of all forms of *yoga* can easily be overlooked.

SOME KEY ASPECTS OF HINDU BELIEF ABOUT THE LIFE-CYCLE



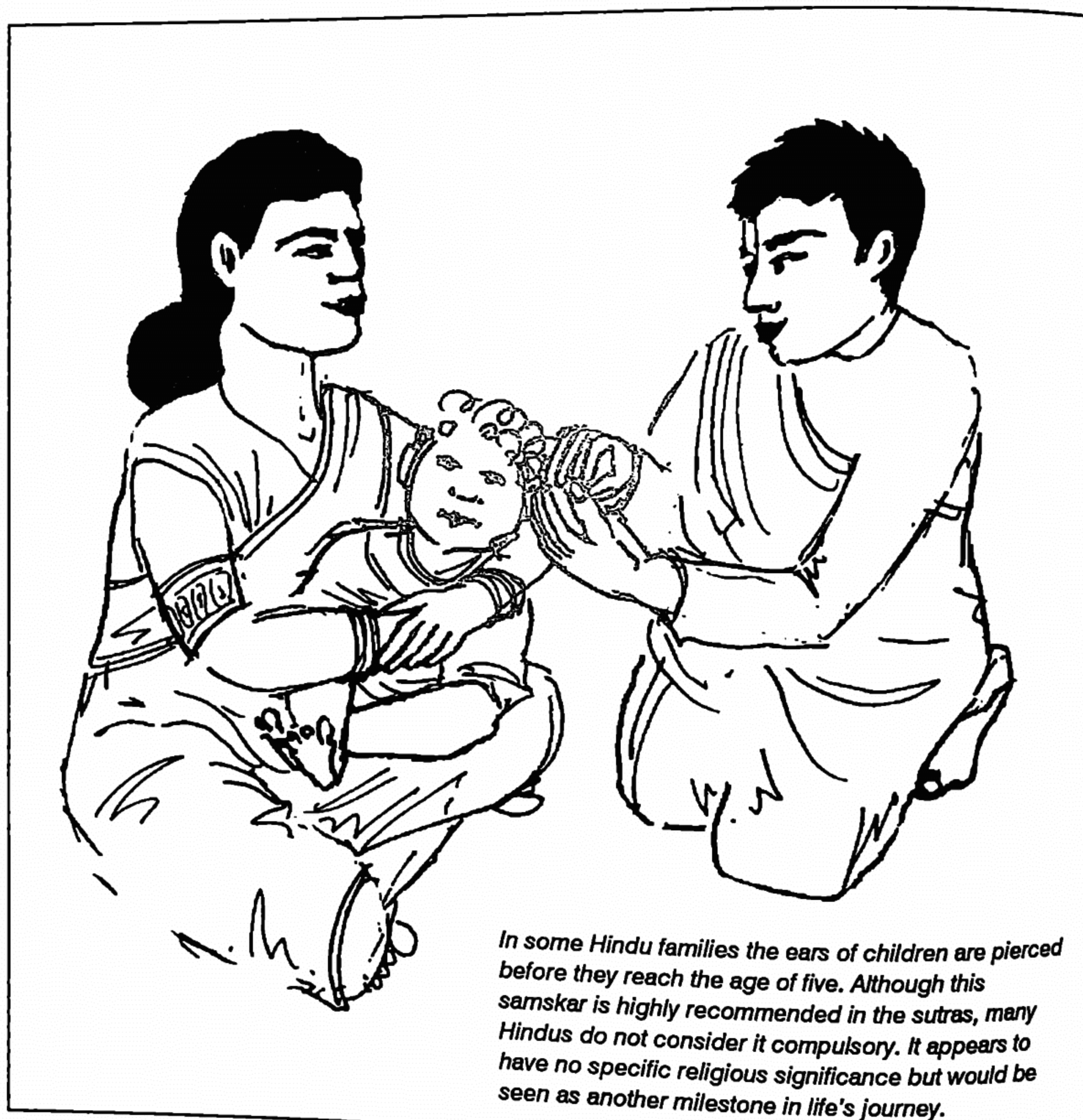
This diagram shows how some key concepts in Hindu thinking relate to each other. The Sanatan Dharma includes different paths to liberation from the cycle of rebirth. Diagrams such as this can be an aid to understanding, but further exploration of these ideas is important.

STAGES OF LIFE

Hindu teaching recognises four stages of adult life, particularly among Brahmins (the priestly *varna*). Many Hindus who are not Brahmin also aspire to a pattern of life which includes study, a full and active family life, and then a time to retire from concerns of the world, and to be devoted to the search for truth. The pattern of a good life would be childhood, including a time of study of the Vedic tradition under a Guru (*brahmacharya*), secondly marriage and family life (*grihastha*), thirdly retirement for meditation, spiritual exercise and study (*vanaprastha*) and finally renunciation of this world (*sannyasa*). The third and fourth stages are not always clearly distinct. These stages of life might be a starting point for pupils to reflect upon the likely shape and contours of their own lives in our society today.

STEPS THROUGH LIFE

The Hindu term for the steps we take through the journey of life is *samskars*. There are various lists of sixteen different *samskars*, although few Hindu communities recognise and practice them all, and the rituals on different lists vary. In early life there are ceremonial ways to mark such events as conception, birth, naming, the first outing, the first rice meal, and the first haircut. Some young Hindus become 'twice born' and receive the sacred thread some time after the age of seven, but this depends upon caste and is not universal. Numerous *samskar* rituals surround marriage. Some lists finish with cremation, but others only include *samskars* for the living.



In some Hindu families the ears of children are pierced before they reach the age of five. Although this samskar is highly recommended in the sutras, many Hindus do not consider it compulsory. It appears to have no specific religious significance but would be seen as another milestone in life's journey.

PILGRIMAGES

The idea of a journey through life is vividly symbolised by pilgrimages to places of special importance in the faith. India is richly blessed with sites of Hindu pilgrimage and for pilgrims from Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism. The rituals associated with Hindu pilgrimage may be joyful, but can also involve penance, austerities such as fasting, the search for purity or the performance of vows. Some pilgrims also seek faith-healing at a place of pilgrimage.

Rivers are often places of pilgrimage. The river Ganges, called 'Ganga Ma' or 'mother Ganges', is particularly sacred.

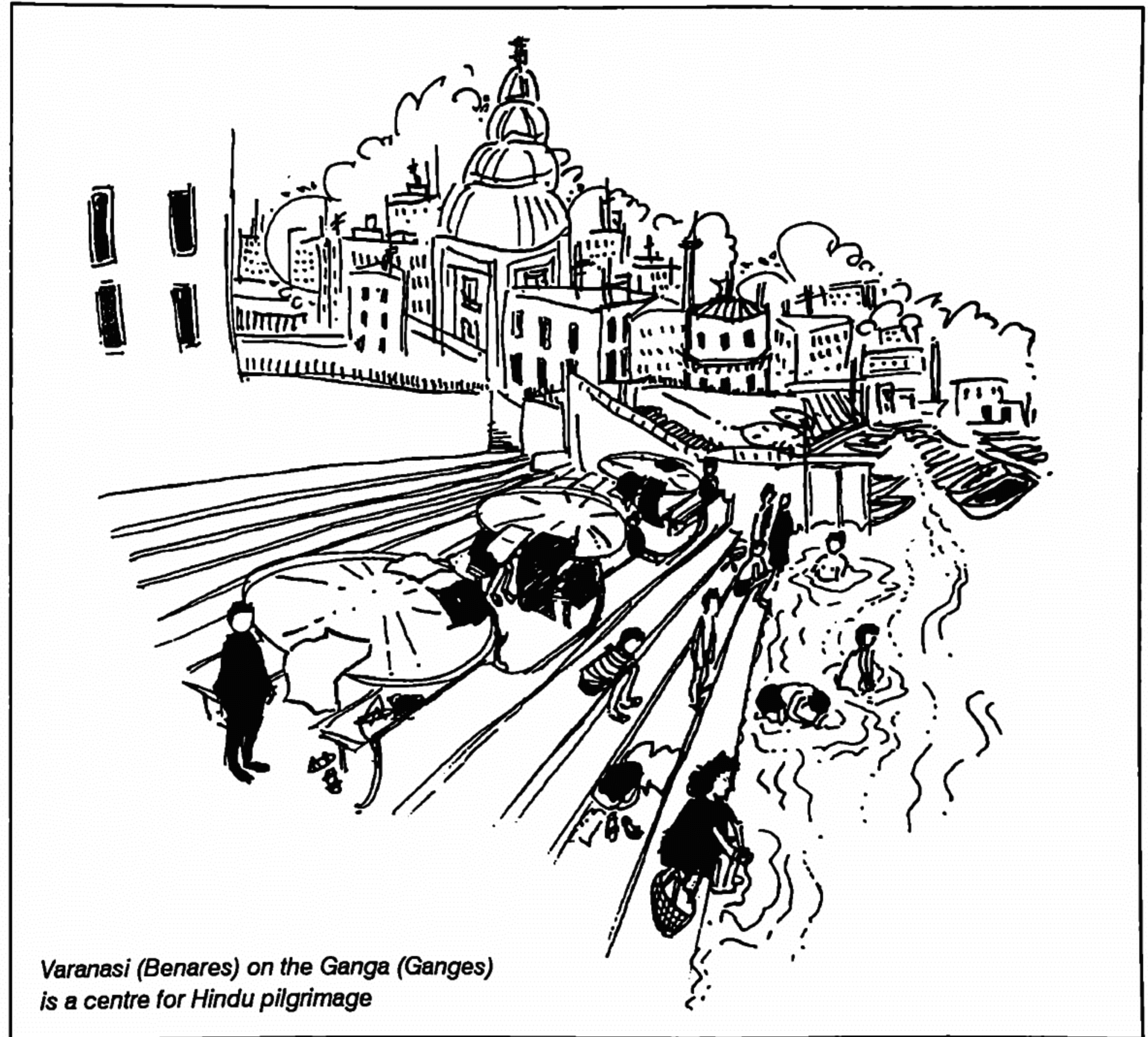
At certain times, the largest gatherings of human beings anywhere on the planet take place as part of Hindu pilgrimage; perhaps over two million people will assemble for the 'Kumbha Mela' at Hardwar, the confluence of the two sacred rivers Jumna and Ganges. This *mela* or assembly occurs once every twelve years. Pilgrims from Britain will certainly be among the crowds.

Varanasi or Benares is a massive centre for devotion to Shiva in particular. Cremations are carried out on the steps or *ghats* beside the river, and worshippers may want their ashes scattered in the Ganges at Varanasi, even if they are cremated in Britain. Pilgrims may return home with bottles of Ganges water, symbolising purification from evil.

Our picture shows pilgrims on the *ghats* at Varanasi, where there are many hundreds of shrines, and where different gurus meet and lead their disciples. A visitor might bathe in the river at dawn and pray

while doing so. The beginning of the day, and the purifying water may symbolise the fresh start

marked by the pilgrimage. Others say the water washes away sorrows, and purifies life from evil.



Varanasi (Benares) on the Ganga (Ganges) is a centre for Hindu pilgrimage

WORSHIP

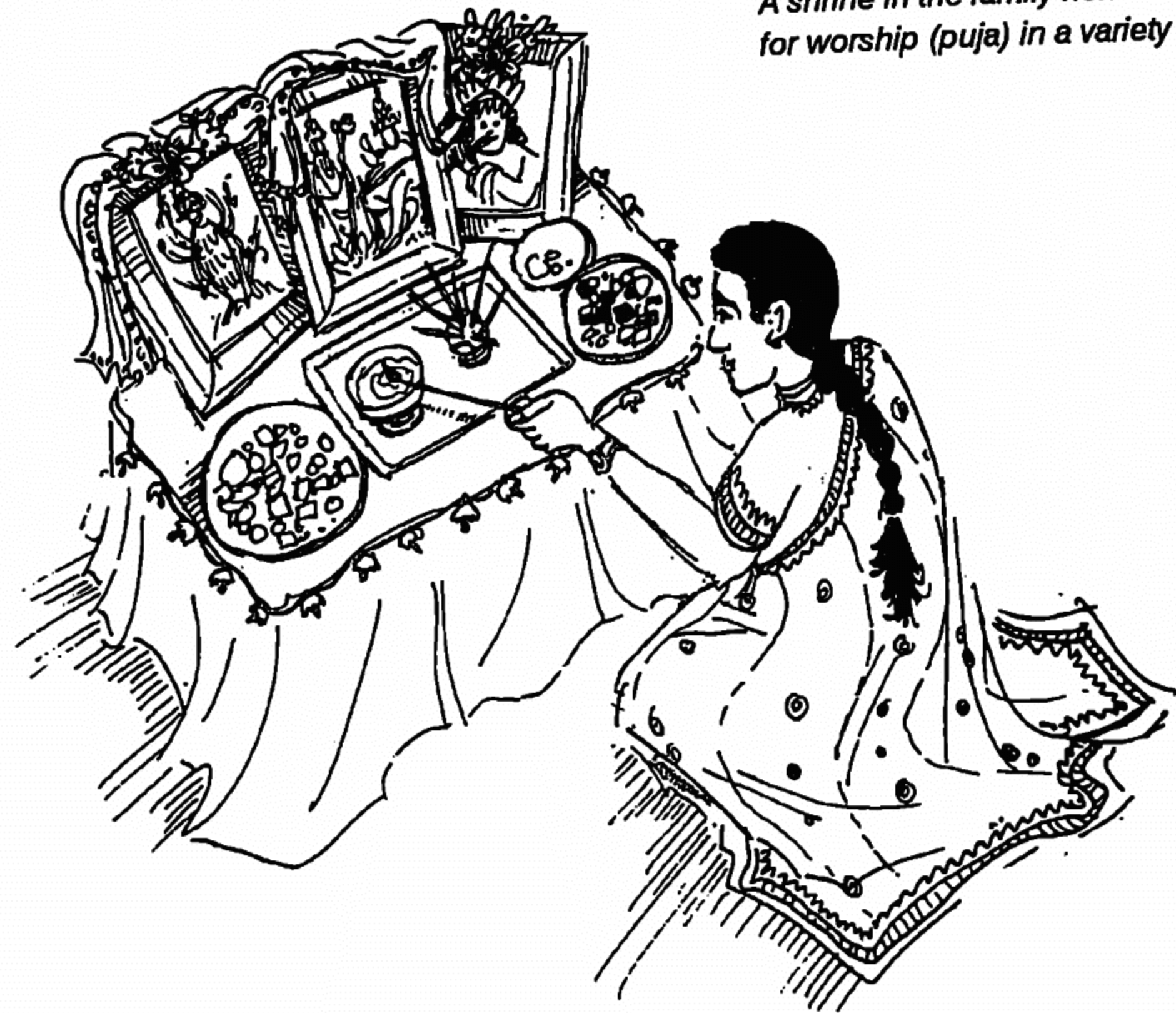
Worship is a centrally important aspect of faith, as the prominence of buildings and shrines for worship all over the world testifies. In the eternal way of the Hindus, worship is woven into the daily pattern of life, rather than concentrated on public observance on a weekly basis, as in some other faiths. The mandir has first importance as a place of worship for many Hindus, but many more worship mostly at home, where a shrine may be set up in the corner of a room.

Questions to ask about worship

What do the places where Hindus worship tell us about Hindu ways of coming near to the gods?

What symbols are commonly used in Hindu worship? What meanings do they have for Hindu believers?

Hindu worship focuses on the most valuable things the faith has to offer. What things are the most valuable to you? Would you say that you worship them?



A shrine in the family home is used for worship (puja) in a variety of ways

WORSHIP AT HOME

Daily *puja* in the home is important to many British Hindus. The form of worship is focused upon the *murti*, or image. This may symbolise the presence of the gods and goddesses, or worshippers may believe the deity lives in the form of the *murti*. Gifts are offered, and along with thanksgiving, the worshipper asks for the blessings

of the god or goddess. These blessings include protection, security, harmony and good fortune. A family might gather early in the morning to sing a *bhajan*, or say a prayer in some homes. In others, the mother will pray for all her family, and in others still there will be a shared *arti* ceremony at the end of the day. The worship of the home may be more significant for many Hindus than the worship of the mandir, and even among individuals who leave the practice of the faith to their

mother, or other family members, the pattern of family worship can give them reassurance, peace or confidence.

FESTIVALS

Festivals often catch the spirit of joy that is part of worship, and in Hindu traditions the many festivals of the different gods and goddesses throughout the year serve to pass on stories about the different deities, to celebrate the life of the community and as happy holidays.

Divali

The festival of Divali has been more studied in British schools than any festival except Christmas. Such study is sometimes the extent of pupils' encounter with not only Hinduism, but indeed with all of the religions of the world other than Christianity. Even so, the religious meaning of the festival can easily be oversimplified, and concentration on the externals of the celebration can prevent a consideration of the place of Divali in the lives of Hindu believers. Diverse customs from different parts of India can usefully be studied. The stories associated with Rama, Sita and Hanuman are often told at Divali time, and the goddess Lakshmi is worshipped, as fresh starts are made. The questions which arise from these festivities include:

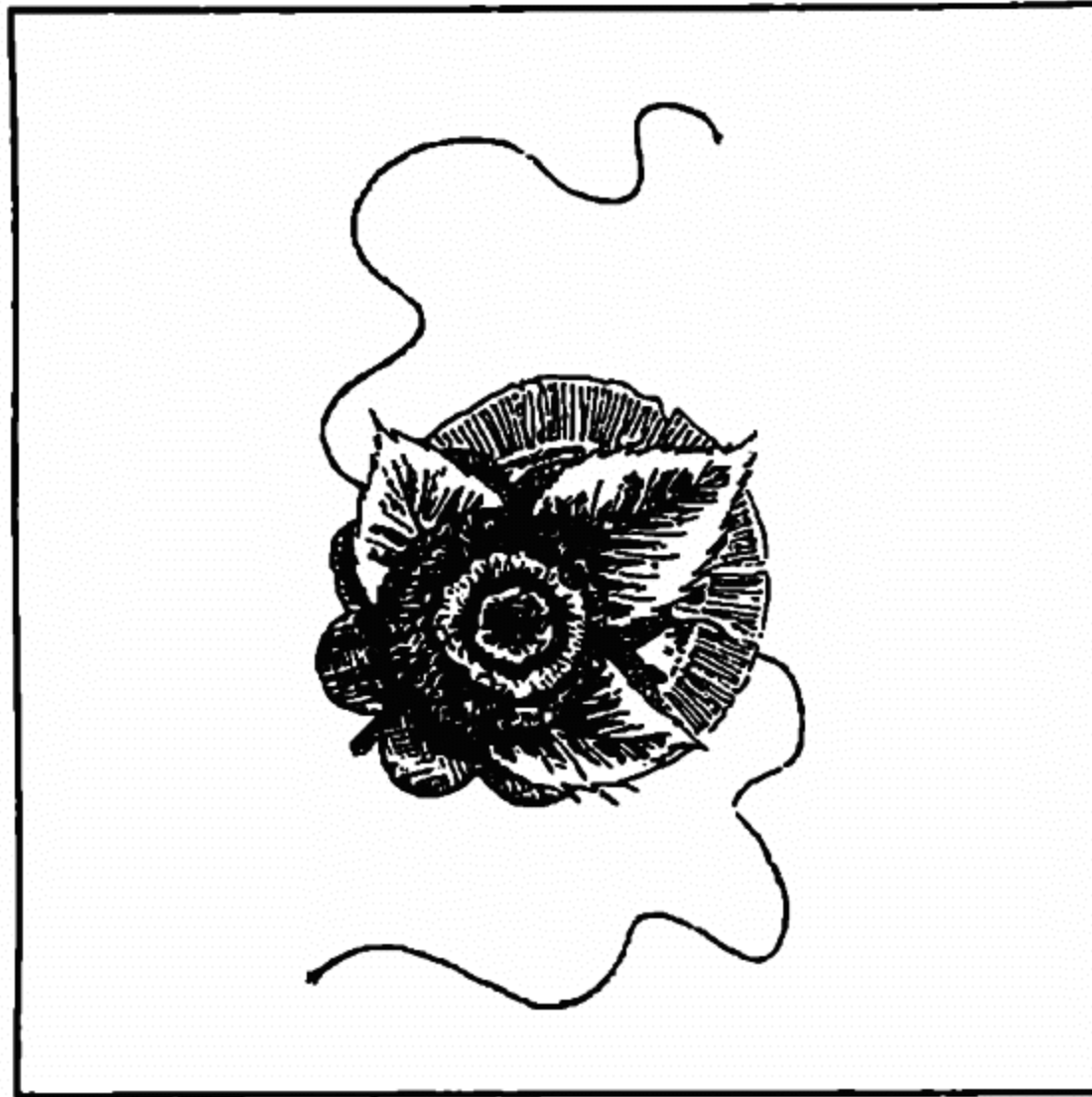
Does good conquer evil?
Is light stronger than darkness?
How can a person make a fresh start?

Celebrations of Divali vary across the Hindu world. In many parts of India, the holiday lasts for five days, and rituals for each day include lamp lighting, purifying bathing, the worship of Lakshmi and the opening of new financial yearbooks for the coming twelve months. Presents and new clothes are

associated with the fourth day of the festival. In Britain, celebrations are often concentrated on a single evening, often a Saturday; various Hindu clubs and mandirs arrange special dinners and firework displays, and some towns have displays of lights as a civic contribution to the festivities.

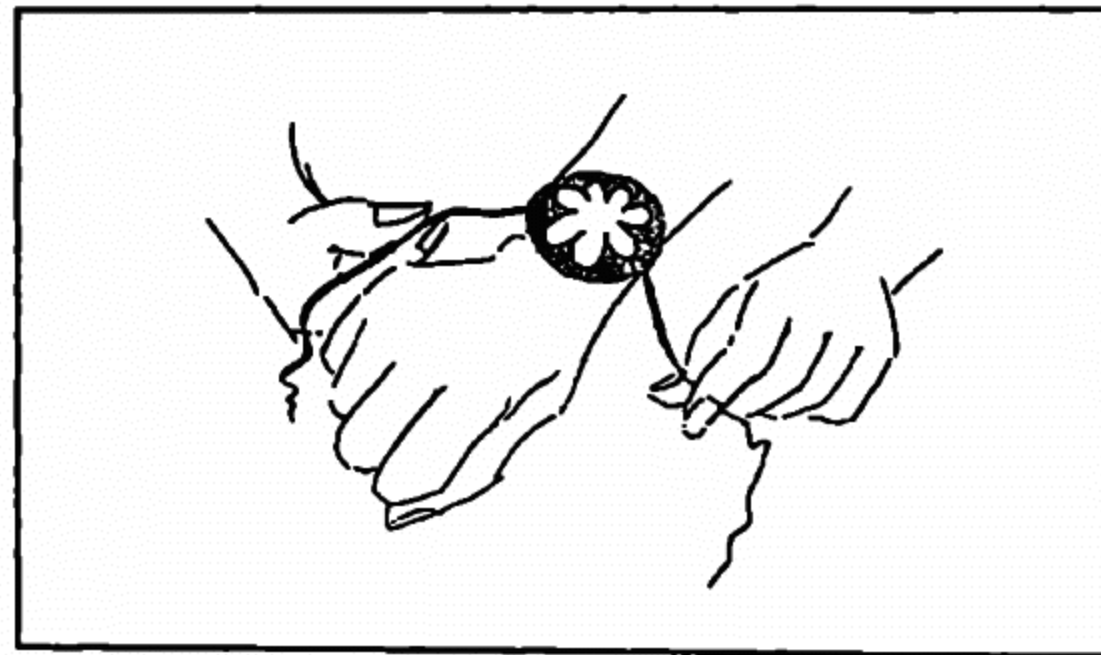
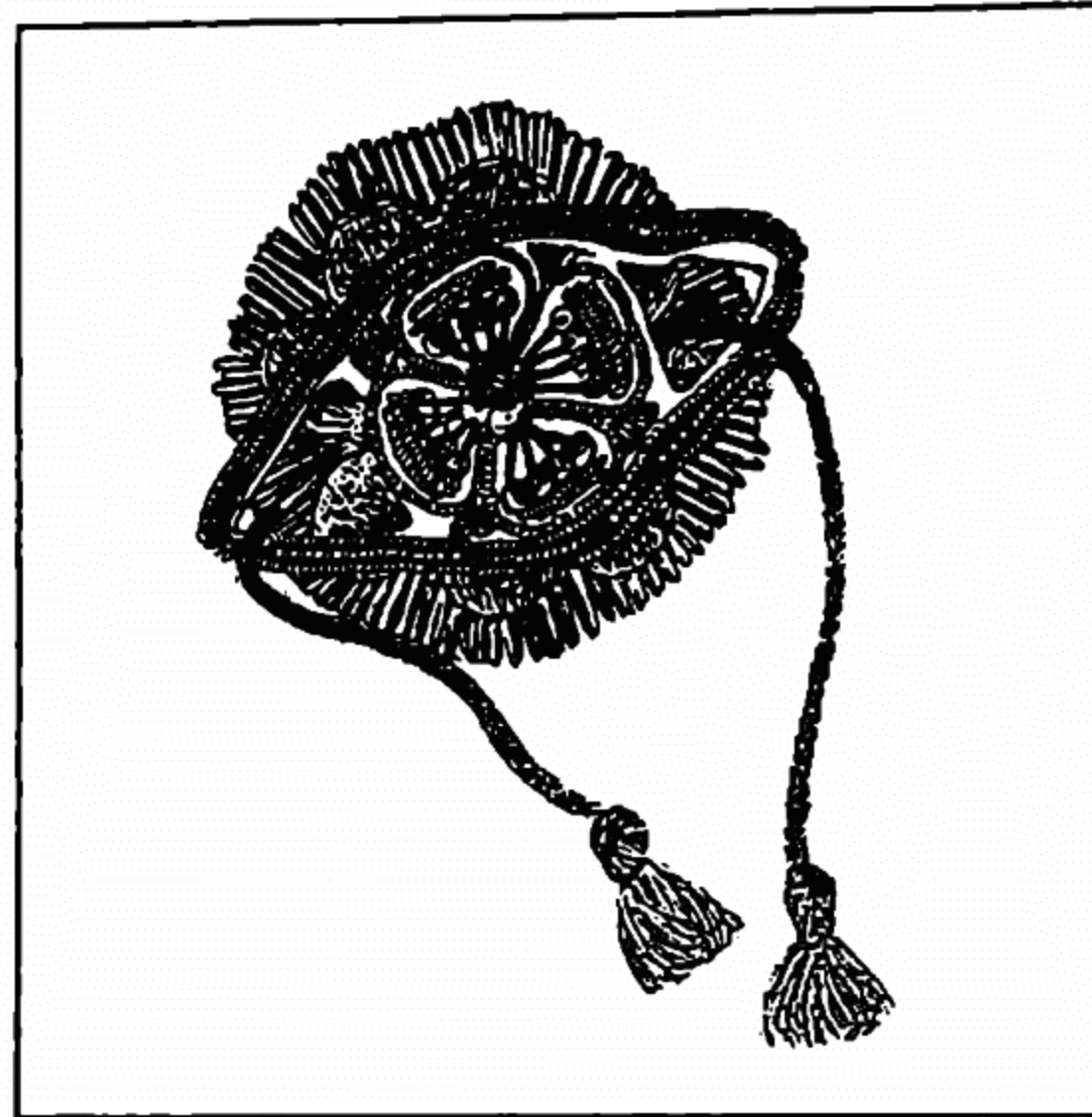


Lakshmi, the goddess of good fortune, features prominently in the celebration of Divali, which also marks the beginning of the new financial year



Raksha Bandhan

This festival occurs on a full moon night in July or August. It therefore usually falls in the school summer holidays in Britain, and is celebrated between sisters, brothers and cousins; the festival celebrates the love of the family. Hindu family ties are usually extended beyond the nuclear family, and British Hindu children have coined the phrases 'cousin brother' and 'cousin sister' to mark the closeness of relationships between cousins. On Raksha Bandhan day, girls take a *rakhi*, a coloured thread, bracelet or wristband which they may have made themselves, and tie it round the wrist of a brother or cousin. Symbols from the Hindu faith may decorate the wristband, and the lads respond to the gift by giving money to their sisters and cousins. As the gifts are exchanged, the girls mark their brothers' heads with red *kumkum* powder and feed them with



sweets. This simple festivity makes a living ritual to express the affection of brothers and sisters, symbolising the duty and joy of care and love within the family. Needless to say, the festival is often marked by good natured practical jokes or friendly banter; giving and receiving *rakhis* is a ritual made spontaneous by the children involved.

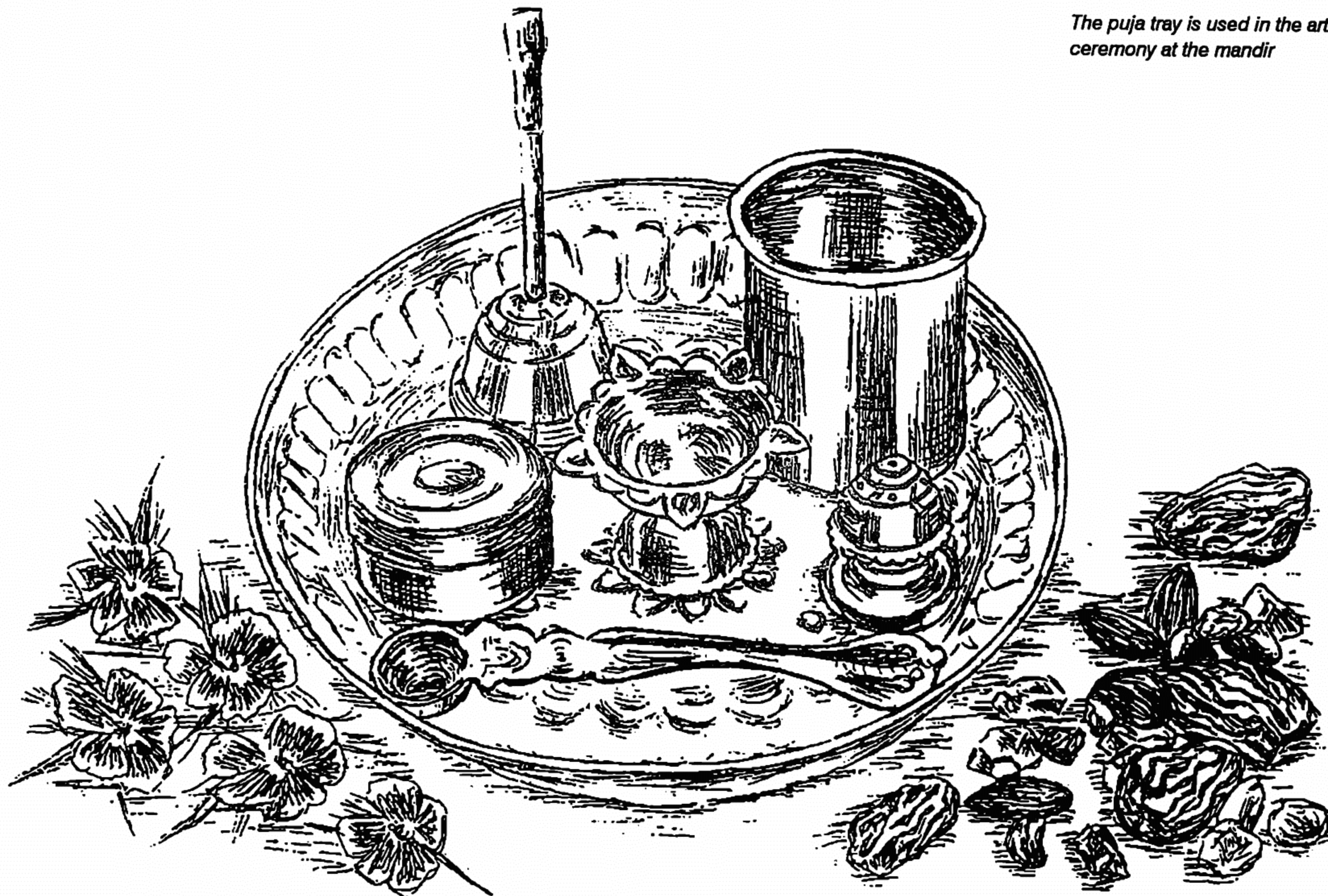
Rakhis come in a variety of forms. The tying of a rakhi on a brother's wrist celebrates the love of brothers and sisters within a family

WORSHIP IN THE MANDIR

In India, mandirs (temples) are often dedicated to the worship of a single deity; a village may have several mandirs, and larger towns or cities several hundred. Among Britain's Hindu mandirs, of which there are now over 130, many serve the whole Hindu community in a town or district, and have shrines to a number of different deities. Most of these are converted from other buildings, the smaller ones from houses, but some are now being purpose built. Inside, the mandir will contain shrines with *murtis* or images of the gods installed in them. These shrines are the focus of many symbolic actions of worship: a worshipper might enter the mandir, remove his or her shoes, ring a bell and walk around the shrine in a clockwise direction, showing respect. A gift of money, milk or fruit may be offered at the shrine, and personal prayers and thanksgivings offered to the god.

Worship in the mandir takes various forms, but *arti* ceremonies, using candle lamps and incense as offerings to welcome the gods and goddesses, are very common. The community joins in hymns or *bhajans* to the different deities, and the priest offers gifts such as lighted lamps, incense or flowers at the shrines. *Arti* concludes with a distribution of food, and a chance to receive the blessing of the gods in the form of the warmth of the lighted candle lamps.

The puja tray is used in the arti ceremony at the mandir



SACRED TEXTS

All religions have written sources of authority which are seen as sacred. Within the Sanatan Dharma, the Vedas, the Bhagavad Gita, the Ramayana and the Puranas have inspired and shaped the tradition. We have shown an example of the ways in which the tradition is shared. Older members of the family teach the children to read, think through and value the teaching of particular sacred texts. Stories from the scriptures are often told and retold, and are available in comic books, or on video.

Questions to ask about sacred texts

In what ways do people see scriptures as revelations of God? How can anything be known about God? Is our knowledge of God like our knowledge of other people?

If we accept a book as holy or sacred, do we have to accept every word, and obey it without question? In what other ways can sacred texts influence the life of believers?

What do Hindus feel and think about a book like the Bhagavad Gita? How do they handle the book? What difference is there between the Gita and an ordinary book?

As much Hindu scripture is thousands of years old, why do you think it remains loved, used and relevant?

The mass and complexity of Hindu sacred literature reflects the diversity of the religion and the long history of sacred writings. Pupils may well approach

this web of writing through stories, but philosophy, mythology, poetry, mantras, chants and hymns all have their importance.

Teaching and learning about the Sanatan Dharma arises from its sacred texts



The Four Vedas, which are each made up of hymns of praise (*mantras*), manuals of worship, and philosophical texts, are the most ancient scriptures. Generally, it would be true to say that many Hindus do not read the four Vedas for themselves, though their study is important to some of the priestly Brahmin caste. These texts were completed around 2500 years ago.

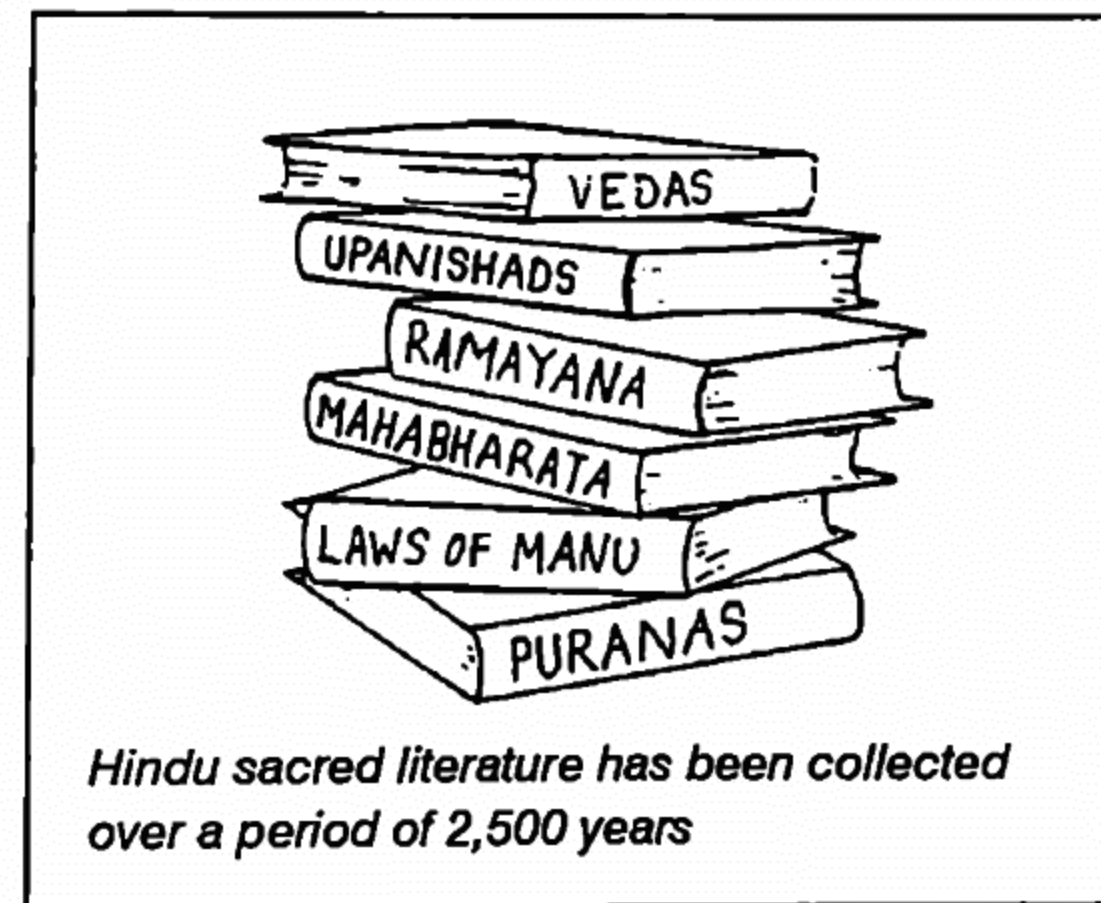
The Upanishads are philosophical texts which explore key teachings such as the idea of the soul and of the cycle of rebirth, the law of *karma* or cause and effect which governs our lives, and the illusory nature of the world we perceive. These texts date from about 2200 years ago.

The Epic texts of Hinduism give stories of the gods. These are very popular and varied, including the Ramayana, the Bhagavad Gita and the Mahabharat. These texts were gathered together over hundreds of years, up to around 1600 years ago. Their stories are retold today on TV and video and in comic books. Pupils may be interested to read them in this form; they are easily available from Hindu bookstores.

Many other collections of sacred literature, including law books, stories of the gods and goddesses and manuals of ritual discipline are available, and are used in various ways by the community.

The use of the scriptures is characteristically Hindu; diversity and adaptation are everywhere. Some Hindus find the mellifluous sound of the scriptural poetry pleasant in itself; others use *mandalas* and songs in their daily worship. Stories are used purely for entertainment by some, but others develop moral ideas through them. *Satsung* groups may

discuss ideas and teachings from the scriptures, and Brahmin priests spend a part of the day chanting the Vedas in the mandir. The scriptures are a guide to worship and ritual purification and a source of authority for daily life. Much of the power of scripture rests in the memories of those who value it; some Hindus know the Bhagavad Gita by heart.



The Aum symbol: a Hindu story

I visited a children's home in Calcutta, India. A young man who worked there told me his story. As a tiny child of five, he had been orphaned, and lived with his older brother. The two of them had no income and no support, so to make a little money to live they became snake catchers. They were able to sell the snakes they caught to a hospital, which used the snake poison to make serum for those who had been bitten.

He showed me how they used to cut a forked stick, which could be used to hold a snake to the ground

just below its neck, and explained how they learned to recognise different snakes, and to handle each one. The more poisonous a snake, the more valuable it was, so the two young brothers specialised in catching the most dangerous snakes.

I asked: 'Were you bitten? Was it dangerous? What protection did you have?' The boy smiled, and pulled from inside his shirt a chain, with a small Aum symbol hanging from it. 'This was from my mother,' he explained. 'I always wore it for protection, and prayed to the gods. I never was bitten.' The Aum symbol is full of meaning to Hindus. It is the first sound uttered in the universe, and is a prelude to meditation and prayer. It represents the earth, the air and the heavens, and symbolises the three gods of the Trimurti. The sanskrit letters of Aum are used on temples, greetings cards and car stickers (!) as a mark of Hindu identity.

Aum – the first sound in the universe, the commonest symbol of the Sanatan Dharma



GLOSSARY

The main references are to Sanskrit terminology, although variants are often found, for example Lakshmi or Laksmi, Vishnu or Visnu. The preferred form in the SCAA *Glossary of Terms* has been given here. Many of these terms will also be found in books on Buddhism and Sikhism, but with somewhat different meanings.

Ahimsa *Not killing.* Non-violence; respect for life.
Arti Welcoming ceremony in which auspicious articles such as incense and lamps are offered to the deity or to saintly people.
Ashram A place set up for spiritual development.
Ashrama A stage of life (of which there are four) adopted according to material considerations, but ultimately as a means to spiritual realisation.
Atman Self. Can refer to body, mind or soul, depending on context. Ultimately, it refers to the real self, the soul.
Aum The sacred symbol and sound representing the ultimate; the most sacred of Hindu words.
Avatar *One who descends.* Refers to the descent of a deity, most commonly Vishnu. Sometimes it is translated as *incarnation* which, although inaccurate, may be the best English word available.
Bhagavad Gita *The Song of the Lord.* Spoken by Krishna, this is the most important scripture for most Hindus. Tradition dates it back to 3,000 years BCE, though most scholars attribute it to the first millennium BCE. Considered an *Upanishad*.

Bhajan Devotional hymn or song.
Bhakti *Devotion; love.* Devotional form of Hinduism.
Brahma A Hindu deity, considered one of the Trimurti, and in charge of creative power; not to be confused with Brahman or Brahmin.
Brahman The ultimate reality, or the all-pervading reality; that from which everything emanates, in which it rests and into which it is ultimately dissolved.
Dharma *Religion or religious duty* is the usual translation into English, but literally it means *the intrinsic quality of the self or that which sustains one's existence*.
Diwali Festival of lights at the end of one year and beginning of the new year, according to one Hindu calendar.
Durga Female deity. A form of the goddess Parvati; wife of Shiva.
Ganesha A Hindu deity portrayed with an elephant's head – a sign of strength. The deity who removes obstacles.
Hanuman The monkey warrior who faithfully served Rama and Sita. Also called Pavansuta (*son of the wind God*).
Holi The festival of colours, celebrated in Spring.
Jati Caste is the usual translation, meaning occupational kinship group.
Jnana *Knowledge.*
Kali Name given to that power of God which delivers justice – often represented by the Goddess Kali (a form of Durga).
Karma *Action.* Used of work to refer to the law of cause and effect.
Kirtan Songs of praise; corporate devotional singing, usually accompanied by musical instruments.

Krishna Usually considered an avatar of Vishnu. One of the most popular of all Hindu deities in contemporary Britain. His teachings are found in the *Bhagavad Gita*.
Lakshmi The goddess of fortune.
Mahabharata The Hindu epic that relates the story of the five Pandava princes. It includes the *Bhagavad Gita*.
Mandir *Temple.*
Mantra That which delivers the mind. Refers to a short sacred text or prayer, often recited repetitiously.
Maya *Not this.* Usually, it refers to illusion, particularly where the permanent soul identifies itself with temporary matter, for example, the body. It can also mean *power*.
Moksha Ultimate liberation from the process of transmigration, the continuous cycle of birth and death.
Murti *Form.* The image or deity used as a focus of worship. 'Idol' should definitely not be used, and 'statue' may also cause offence.
Navaratri The Nine Nights Festival preceding Dassehra, and held in honour of the goddess Durga.
Nirvana The cessation of material existence.
Parvati The consort of Shiva, also known by other names such as Durga, Devi, etc.
Prashad Sacred or sanctified food.
Puja *Worship.* General term referring to a variety of practices in the home or Mandir.
Purana *Ancient.* Part of the Smriti scriptures. Contains many of the well-known stories of Hinduism.
Rakhi A bracelet, usually made out of silk or cotton, tied to give protection and to strengthen the bond of mutual love.

Raksha Bandhan The festival when women tie a decorative bracelet on their brothers' wrists.

Rama The incarnation of the Lord, and hero of the **Ramayana** (avoid using the variant 'Ram' for obvious reasons).

Ramayana The Hindu epic that relates the story of **Rama** and **Sita**, composed by the sage Valmiki thousands of years ago.

Rig Veda The first scripture of Hinduism, containing spiritual and scientific knowledge.

Rishi A spiritually wise person. More specifically, one of the seven seers who received the divine wisdom.

Samskar Sacraments designed to initiate a new stage of life. There is usually a total of sixteen such rites of passage (though many schools of thought do not practise them all).

Sanatan Dharma The eternal or imperishable religion; also known as Vedic Dharma. Adherents often prefer this term to Hinduism since it characterises their belief in the revealed and universal nature of religion.

Saraswati The power of knowledge, often represented by the goddess Saraswati, the goddess of learning.

Shaktism The religion of Hindus who are devotees of **Shiva**.

Shakti Energy or power, especially of a Hindu feminine deity.

Shiva A Hindu god. The name means *kindly or auspicious*.

Shri *Illustrious*. Used as a title of respect, for example Shri Krishna. Also a respectful title for men. The feminine form is Shrimati (Mrs).

Shruti *That which is remembered*. Applicable to Hindu scriptures other than the **Vedas**.

Sita The divine consort of **Rama**.

Smriti *That which is heard*. A term specifically applied to the four **Vedas**, including the **Upanishads**. Some Hindus believe that Smriti is subservient to **Shruti**, but other Hindus consider them to have equal importance.

Swastika From the Sanskrit for well-being; a mark of good fortune. The four arms signify the four directions (space), the four **Vedas** (knowledge), and the four stages (time) in the life cycle. Not to be confused with the Nazi symbol.

Trimurti *The three deities*. Refers to **Brahma**, **Vishnu** and **Shiva**, who personify and control the three gunas. They represent and control the three functions of creation, preservation and destruction. 'Trinity' should be avoided.

Upanishad *To sit down near*. A sacred text based on the teaching of a guru to a disciple. The **Upanishads** explain the teachings of the **Vedas**.

Vaishnavism The religion of Hindus who are devotees of the god Vishnu.

Varna *Colour*. The four principal divisions of Hindu society. It is important to note that the word 'caste' refers strictly to sub-divisions within each varna, and not to varnas themselves.

Veda *Knowledge*. Specifically refers to the four **Vedas**, though any teaching which is consistent with the conclusions of these scriptures is also accepted as Vedic.

Vishnu A Hindu god. With **Brahma** and **Shiva** forms the **Trimurti**.

Yoga Communion; union of the soul with the Supreme, or a process which promotes that relationship. The English word 'yoke' is derived from yoga.

BOOKLIST

It is impossible to give a comprehensive list of books, but the following are particularly useful to teachers and pupils.

Teaching RE 5-11: Hinduism (CEM)

Teaching RE 11-16: Hinduism (CEM)

Approaches to Hinduism, Robert Jackson and Dermot Killingley (John Murray), 0-7195-4362-2.

Celebrate Hindu Festivals, Kadodwala and Gateshill (Heinemann - forthcoming).

Dashavatar: The Ten Incarnations of the Lord, Rasamandala Das and Jayaradhe Dasi (ISCON), 0-9522686-0-4.

Growing Up in Hinduism, Jaqueline Hirst with Geeta Pandey (Longman), 0-582-00285-0.

The Hindu World, Patricia Bahree (Macdonald), 0-356-07521-4.

Listening to Hindus, Robert Jackson and Eleanor Nesbitt (Unwin Hyman), 0-0444-8121-7.

Themes in Religion: Hinduism, S C Mercier (Longman), 0-582-02968-6.

World Religions: Hinduism, Dilip Kadodwala (Wayland), 0-7502-1444-9.

World Religions: Hinduism, V P (Hemant) Kanitkar (Stanley Thornes & Hulton), 1-871402-09-3.

Religions in the UK: A Multi-Faith Directory, published by the University of Derby with the Inter Faith Network for the United Kingdom, has 67 pages on Hindus in Britain, including 44 pages of national organisations and local mandirs. Obtainable from the Religious Resource and Research Centre, University of Derby, Mickleover, Derby DE3 5GX.

The poem given here appears in a number of different versions, often called the blind men and the elephant. Some of these versions are now outdated, and so this version, written for 'One World Week' in 1993, is offered in this publication. The poem may encourage students to think about the different perspectives on life which we receive all the time from the media. It also points towards an aspect of the Hindu teaching about Brahman: that no human mind can come close to the whole truth about ultimate reality. The worship of the many forms of god in Hindu faith might be explained with reference to the different ideas which the camera crews latch on to, but teachers will want to be very cautious about using this as a model to explain the differences between the world's religions.

